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PRINCE PHILIP, the Camp Spy.

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RUTH NEUMANN. BY ALBERT CECIL GAINES.



"THE STRANGLERS' WORK!" CRIED THE PRINCE, HOLDING THE MATCH CLOSE TO THE SCARRED NECK.

Prince Philip, THE CAMP SPY;

OR,

The Thugs of Triple Butte.

A Romance of the Arizona Thunderbolt Legion.

BY ALBERT CECIL GAINES.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER, DEAD.

THE look of astonishment on Eagle Jerry's face as he flung open the door of the stage-coach and beheld the sight within, was something to be remembered.

The loquacious little Jehu had swung himself from his high box with a running fire of characteristic comment, calculated to interest a newcomer to the flourishing camp of Triple Butte, and to impress the motley crowd that was loitering in front of Mexican Jack's resort, where he had drawn up, with the great importance of Mr. Eagle Jerry's arrival.

"Hyer we are, stranger—hyer we are at last, by hokey! Triple Butte, ther queen city ov ther Southwest—ther gem of Arizona—youngest, but not least, not by a dooce ov a sight! Ever'thing hez an end, an' so hez ther Tucson trail; an' hyer we are, right at ther famous Mex's, whar you kin git more p'izen to ther ounce o' gold-dust than anywhar north o' Ranch Robin. Thar's Mex, himself, ready ter receive ye, lookin' as pert as a partridge. An' thar's Tomahawk, an' Apache Abe, an' Doc Dimity, an' Tiny Pete, an' Lengthy, an' Cap'n Toddy an' the Pirate; an', durn me, ef that ain't the widdy, jest a-waitin', ez usual, fer that ole man o' hers what never comes! Whoa, Jasper! Consarn ye, ye'll git yer feed soon enough, I reckon. This is ther place, stranger, an' Eagle Jerry's ther man to land ye hyer only forty minuits ahind time, even ef that wuz a terrible storm a-blowin' ag'in' us. Why, that time I wuz held up by Cap'n Eagle's men—Great Caesar!"

No wonder Eagle Jerry was astounded.

His passenger was dead!

Not only was he dead, but, as the excited Jehu presently found voice to explain to the curious and eager group of Triple Butte citizens, he was not the proper passenger at all—he was not the man who had entered the stage at Tucson, who had set up the cigars and ridden with him on the box until the storm came on them back in the mountains, and who told him that he had helped to swing Captain Eagle to a limb.

That man had a full, brown beard, and long hair, and wore a handsome jacket of navy blue; while this man appeared far younger, was smooth-shaven, and had short hair, and wore no jacket at all.

Jerry declared he had never seen this man before, and the crowd that gathered around the body when it was removed from the stage and placed on a table in Mex's place, was equally certain that he was an utter stranger.

There were no papers whatever on his person which might serve to identify him. He had evidently been robbed, for there was not so much as a weapon about him.

He had been murdered—that was plain enough. There were deep creases in his throat, showing that he had been choked by talon-like fingers, and there were bruises upon his arms which in all probability were the result of a desperate struggle to defend himself.

The crowd seemed to recognize the finger-marks, for they looked at each other significantly and with angry utterances.

"Thar's somethin' infernal strange about this hyer," averred Apache Abe. "'Tain't ther fu'st time o' late we've seen these signs an' tokens. Mighty cur'us you don't know nothin' about this onfortunit cadaver, Jerry."

The crowd had now increased until Mex's place was well-nigh full. Triple Butte was not so large a camp but that the news of a mystery such as this would be known to everybody in a few minutes, and the result was that the entire populace of two hundred souls turned out to view the body and speculate on the unusual features of the case.

"He's shore dead?" some one asked Dr. Dimity, who was carefully examining the body.

"Dead?" exclaimed the ungainly, one-eyed physician, in his quick, rasping voice, "why, he's clean cold."

The man who seemed to take the most interest

in the dead passenger, but who had the least to say, was Tomahawk.

"What do you think ov this hyer sarcumstance, Tommy?" one of his familiars asked him.

The big rough expressed himself in accord with the general sentiment, that it was "mighty strange." "Eagle Jerry's ther one ter shover 'terrogation points at," he added; "he's ther one ter explain why this Tucson stage-coach hez been turned inter a hearse. I don't understand it, none whatever."

Eagle Jerry found himself the object of some suspicion. It seemed very queer, indeed, that he should start with one passenger, arrive with another, and that other murdered, and still be totally ignorant of the why and wherefore of such a remarkable proceeding.

"I'm a-preachin' you people Gospel truth," he vociferated, warmly, bringing his empty glass down on the bar with such force that it broke in a score of pieces, "when I tells you I knows nothin' whatsumever ov this hyer peculiar episode. I never wuz quite so kerflummixed in my life, by hokey, ez when I pulled open ther trap o' ther rollin' stock an' took in this stiff. Ez a stiff I hev no hesitashun in sayin' this gent is a genoone success, but ez an acquaintance er an ole friend I be durned ef he cuts any wide swath in my estimashun. I swears I never see him till I opens that hearse door."

"Mebbe you hed somethin' stronger'n cigars in Tucson—somethin' that wuz sorter hypnotizin', an' a good deal ov it; eh, Jerry?"

The little Jehu drew himself up with offended dignity and gave the speaker a withering look.

"You makes me sick, son," he growled. "Ther lickid tanglebuf ain't made what kin ruffle me, ye kin salt that down. I bet I kin swaller more p'izen than Cap'n Toddy to-day an' not feel no onpleasant effex thereof. Why, that time I wuz held up by Cap'n Eagle's men—"

"Are you sure you had but one passenger?" asked a young man who had been one of the late comers to Mex's "Red Light," and who, after studying the face of the dead stranger carefully, had evinced a very deep interest in the case.

"Shore?—ov course I'm shore!" retorted Jerry. "I trust you ain't a-doubtin' ov my word, none, Prince Philip?"

"No," said the youth, shortly. "Give us a history of your trip in detail, Jerry."

The little Jehu, who seemed to think himself the hero of the occasion, assumed a very important air, winked patronizingly at "the widdy," who hung shyly about the doorway, too timid to come and mingle with the crowd and too interested to leave, and who gave him a bright smile of encouragement, and then he proceeded, digressing, however, to remark:

"Ef the widdy bain't fergot ter ask about 'er ole man fer once!" Adding: "Waal, he didn't show up, widdy, unless this stiff be him. An' ef this be him ye'r' welcome ter claim 'im, an' cl'ar up ther mystery or his identity what envelops him like a wet blanket."

As "the widdy" drew back and did not seem disposed to claim the dead stranger for her long-lost husband, Eagle Jerry came to the point.

"We rolled out o' Tucson squar' on time, an' though I bain't much on 'ritbmetic ner figger, I knows enough ter count ther passengers when thar hain't but one. An' this hyer passenger he had brown whiskers an' a fancy coat, and he says to me, climbin' up on the box alongside, an' a-settin' up ov a cigar, says he, 'I've heerd on you, Eagle Jerry, an' thar be men in the mines what opine you could drive Texas steers er buff'loes ef yer take a notion. What time does we git to Triple Butte?' 'Bout sundown,' says I, an' then we fell a-talkin', an' he asks me all about this hyer kentry, sayin' he wuz a stranger somewhat, but not a-givin' ov his name, now thet I remembers our converse. When we gits well inter ther Vulture Range a matter o' ten miles back thar, an' ther storm comes a-screamin' like hyenas down the mountains, ther stranger ups an' says, 'I don't see ez how I got a call ter git so infernal damp,' an' sayin' thet forthwith he slides down an' crawls inside. Thet be ther last I see ov him, so help me!"

"Did you stop at all on the way—long enough for anybody else to get in?" asked the youth.

"Yes, I stopped," Jerry answered, reflectively. "When ther black wind an' rain comes a-tearin' ag'in' my face a-blindin' ov my eyes an' a-scarifyin' ther critters, I draws up alongside a big rock an' reposest thar fer considerable space. 'Now, let 'em howl,' says I, a-duckin' my head an' holdin', meantimes, onter ther ribbons, an' howl they did, shore enough. I thinks ther hull

blame sky be split wide open an' ther flood a-leakin' out. All ther tire the thunder wuz a-cavortin' up an' down, an' ther lightnin' wuz a-paintin' things red, an' ther wind wuz a-yankin' cottonwoods up by ther roots. When ther circus wuz all over I rolls inter Triple Butte only forty minutes ahind time."

"And you did not see nor hear anything of your passenger after the storm?" queried Prince Philip.

"Nary a bear ner see."

"Couldn't the stage have been entered while you were stopped there, and you not heard anything?"

"Waal, I guesses yes," Jerry admitted. "Seein' ez how thar wuz sech a terrible racket a-blowin', thar might 'a' been a camp-meetin' inside an' me a-knowin' nothin' thereof."

This seemed to settle the question as to when the mysterious crime was committed, and as Eagle Jerry was "at the end of his rope," so to speak, it was useless to interrogate him further.

The entire solution of the mystery, together with the cause of the crime, must remain, unless divined by those who were wiser than they cared to admit, a matter altogether of speculation or future development.

The fact that the stranger had been choked to death was a much discussed point, and one which promised to be a key to the mystery. This was not the first death of this character which had occurred of late in the vicinity of Triple Butte. The little gold camp was now awake to the fact that it was the prey of merciless thugs, whose identity and motives could only be guessed at. And there were men in Triple Butte, whose memory of past deeds was unimpaired, who trembled at the thought of secret vengeance and of silent and pitiless pursuers. They waited impatiently for time to reveal, as time must, the truth concerning the dread stranglers.

After awhile, when the strange crime of the stage-coach had been thoroughly discussed in all its phases, the crowd at the Red Light began to dwindle away. The women—there were a half-dozen of them including "the widdy"—were the first to depart, and they were followed by the more reputable class of miners who were old-fashioned enough to think it better to sleep at night than to drink and gamble their hard-earned gold away at the seductive gaming resort of the yellow tough from Mexico.

Presently only the regular gang of loafers remained, Tomahawk and the men who looked up to him. They seemed to forget about the man outstretched on the table, when the cards were produced.

In about an hour Prince Philip, who had gone out in company with Eagle Jerry, returned alone.

"The dead stranger must have decent burial," he remarked. "Will any of you gents lend a hand?"

A curious gleam came into Tomahawk's eyes.

"Ther boy seems ter hev a durn lot ov int'rest in this hyer corpus," he remarked in an undertone to Apache Abe, who sat at his left. Prince Philip overheard the insinuating speech.

"I noticed that you showed a good deal of interest yourself," he retorted. "As for me—well, I only want to treat a white man white."

"The two exchanged angry looks, but neither said anything more.

"The boy is all right," declared Apache Abe, in reply to Tomahawk's remark.

The crowd "lent a hand," and the stranger was buried.

CHAPTER II.

THE AFFRAY AT MEX'S.

On the day after the morrow, when Eagle Jerry made his regular trip to Tucson, he carried in the meager mail a letter written by Prince Philip, which, the little Jehu would have been surprised to learn, contained a very lucid explanation of the mystery to which he had treated Triple Butte.

But this letter was very innocent in appearance, and even the wise and solemn "Lengthy," the camp postmaster, who scanned the address long and earnestly in order to decipher its destination—not that the penmanship was bad, but Lengthy was a little "out of practice" in reading—was without the faintest suspicion of its contents.

For reasons known only to himself, the youth chose to convey the information of which he was possessed to some one who was a long distance from Triple Butte, while, so far as the camp was concerned, he kept his facts strictly secret. At

the same time, he grimly registered a resolve that Triple Butte should know the whole truth before very long.

Philip was twenty-one. He came originally from the East somewhere, and had been in the mines only a few weeks; but he was never a tenderfoot, as the term was understood. From the moment of his arrival he bore himself with the mien of an old-timer, and quickly demonstrated that he was more than able to take care of both himself and his interests.

He dressed picturesquely in a costume that was half Mexican, and wore arms in his belt after the fashion prevailing in Arizona in the times when law was unknown except as individuals made it.

Nicknames were epidemic, and their prevalence contributed another feature of life in that rough and tough land. Somebody had called the young new-comer "Prince Philip," out of compliment to both his elegance of manner and his royal good-fellowship, and in twenty-four hours he was generally known by the fitting sobriquet.

Philip took a little cabin on the south side of town, and straightway proceeded to make himself comfortable. His ostensible business consisted of buying gold-dust of the miners who, for various reasons, preferred currency to the actual fruits of their labors. For example, money was much more convenient for gambling purposes than bulky bags of the "dust," and when the red-shirted profligates came tramping into camp after their day's or their week's work "to make a night of it," they were only too glad to be met by the genial Philip and to receive in exchange for their gold its equivalent in bills or coins, to allow a pretty margin of profit as recompense for the obligation. Philip soon made a reputation for square dealing that brought him all the trade he could manage.

The business antagonized the vicious interests of the professional gamblers, for they were in the habit of not only getting this profit of exchange themselves, but of cheating their victims outrageously in weighing the metal and appraising it, especially when the victims were well-loaded with liquor or excited by the game. So the gamblers naturally regarded Philip and his vocation with disfavor, which increased from day to day at a rate commensurate with the young man's success. However, the Prince was not in the least disturbed by their growls, and pursued his calling industriously, evidently being well supplied with money.

It had been hinted that Prince Philip had a secret mission in coming to Triple Butte, but the youth only laughed at the idea when it was mentioned to him. Nevertheless, there were those who thought it a suspicious fact that he should be so particular to cultivate a familiar acquaintance with nearly everybody in camp, and especially with "Old Likely," who was the oldest inhabitant, and who, when he was not out of his mind—which he was the largest part of the time—could tell the history of Triple Butte from the time gold was first discovered there, and very shady history some of it was. He knew everybody and everything, and it was said that more than once his life had been threatened by those who stood in fear of his revelations.

Old Likely was now a simple and harmless old man, who week after week sat in front of his log hut, over by the three buttes which had given the camp its name, digging about his feet in the sand and muttering to himself.

He had never discovered a paying lead, but he was always hopeful, always thinking it "likely" that he would "strike it rich" right away, and this cheerful propensity had resulted in his receiving the title of "Old Likely."

Notwithstanding the growing enmity of Tomahawk and his evil associates, and the trifling suspicions that occasionally fixed themselves upon him, Philip soon occupied a high place in popular esteem, and the camp recognized him as one of its most respectable and progressive citizens. Even Apache Abe had the grace to say: "Ther boy is all right,"—but probably with an underlying motive.

However, the serenity of Prince Philip's existence was all at once rudely broken. The young gold speculator had a fall, and it was as severe as it was sudden.

The night following Eagle Jerry's departure with the letter, he was called into the Red Light as he was passing by, and, as the hour was late, and only Tomahawk and his fellow roughs were there, he knew, from the nature of the summons, that trouble was brewing.

The Red Light was notorious for trouble. Mexican Jack, or "Mex," as he was called for short, was a yellow-faced, evil looking character, whose whole past life was punctuated with

crimes of varying degrees of recklessness, and who emphasized his depravity by boasting of his record whenever he was filled with his own liquid poison. Needless to add, he countenanced any sort of wickedness that didn't break the bottles on the shelves behind the bar.

"Thar's Prince Philip!" cried some one, as the youth entered the resort in response to the call. "Say it ter his face, Mozeek!"

The whole crowd was drunk, and there were cards scattered over the floor, which indicated that the games had broken up with a row.

Tomahawk stood in the center of the room gesticulating and vociferating, and there was blood on his cheek. Doc Dimity was tying bandages on a man who lay groaning on a bench in a corner. This man had a great gash in his right hand where Tomahawk had pinned it with a twelve-inch bowie to the table, and he had a bullet under his scalp that Tomahawk had placed there an instant after the wounded hand had crashed into his face. Mex sat astride the bar with a revolver in his hand, ready to repudiate Tiny Pete's insinuation that he was a "liver-faced Greaser from the Rio Grande." There was much loud talking on all sides, especially on the part of a heavy-framed, red-faced rough who was angrily asserting that he had been fleeced by "thet'ar durn kiote, Prince Philip."

"That's not so!" said Prince Philip, promptly, as the declaration reached his ears. "I never had any dealings with you, Mozeek!"

"Hyer, boy!" called out Tomahawk at this moment, catching sight of the youth for the first time, and apparently forgetting his personal difficulty. "This high-jeeb Mozeek hez ter say you skinned 'im out o' some quantities o' gold-dust, an' we all thinks ter see this thing settled fa'r an' squar', an' thet straightaway sudden. Mozeek finds himself short, an' it spiles ther game. We rises ter ask what fur ye do up Mozeek, he bein' quiet an' lady-like, an' a-disturbin' ov ye none whatever? Thet style don't suit this camp none, you finds that out durn soon."

Philip calmly confronted Mozeek, while the crowd gathered around, and a sullen silence fell over the room.

The boy was not one to seek a trouble of any kind, but when it was thrust at his face he would not dodge it. He would have been voted a coward if he had not responded to the summons, and now that he was face to face with the man who accused him of a sneaking theft, he was not backward in offering his defense.

"Who told you I cheated you, Mozeek?" he asked the drunken desperado, his brilliant eyes glowing.

"Nobody told me—I knows it ov my own free will," was the surly reply.

"As we never had a trade of any kind, I don't quite see how I could have cheated you," asserted the youth.

"Didn't hev no trade? I says yes!" howled the rough, swinging his huge fists tragically. "We bez a trade two hours ago, an' I sw'ars to that!"

"You haven't had gold enough to make a trade interesting since I've known you. Who put you up to this game? Who told you to say I fleeced you?"

"Nobody did, consarn yer pictur'! I hez my rights in this camp, er I bu'st this camp wide open! I allows no pan-faced cherub frum ther effete East ter rub my fur ther wrong way! Now you ponies up my jest dues er I salivate yer meat-house, an' thet double-quick!"

"Seems ez how thar be only one way ter settle this diffikelty," put in Tomahawk again at this point. "Ther kid must put up er be shut up fer good. We hev ther word ov a highly respected citizen thet he ain't in line with the great moral principuls ov this God-fearin' camp, wherfore we carves 'im up like a duck. Which ther same we hyer delegates ter our pard Mozeek, who does his fowl brown an' choice."

This blustering did not seem to daze Philip in the least. He recognized in the affray that was being precipitated upon him the culmination of the dislike cherished for him by the vicious spirits that made their headquarters at the Red Light, and he knew that it had been concocted to afford an excuse for summarily disposing of him. In other words, it was a cut-and-dried plan for the desperado Mozeek to fall upon him and kill him. But Prince Philip was made of a metal that did not melt in the heat of battle. He was like tempered steel.

"We shoots fu'st an' palavers arterward!" suddenly uttered Mozeek. "I finds it my duty ter make a meal o' you, an' I chaws yer up in haste. I draws a fine bead, I does, an' I leaves no scraps. Ther honor o' Triple Butte is at stake, an' I sends

yer ter glory forthwith, ter satisfy a long-felt want thar!"

Mozeek had a revolver leveled at Prince Philip's heart, and his finger on the trigger!

With all his calmness and courage, Prince Philip seemed doomed to an instant death!

CHAPTER III.

A WARNING AND DISCOVERY.

THE youth did not need to glance around to assure himself that no friend was there to prevent the impending crime—he knew that instinctively.

Even if there were those present who were not in the plot to kill him, nor in sympathy with it, which was probable, they were not so strong in their allegiance that they would care to offend Tomahawk by an open demonstration in his behalf. In deed, it was not so much a question of care as dare; that this was Tomahawk's game was palpable enough, and to block it was to antagonize a man whom the bravest shrank from having as a foe. The big gambler was deadly in his dislikes, and he was universally dreaded.

As for Mozeek, he was recognized as merely a tool, upon whose shoulders Tomahawk could shift the stigma of the assassination. Mozeek was a reckless, irresponsible creature who had no more qualms in executing his chief's villainous mandates than he had in taking a drink. For the reason that Prince Philip had so many friends in camp, and for other reasons, perhaps, Tomahawk was not desirous of openly showing his hand against him just at present, hence the thin disguise of setting up Mozeek to do the deadly work.

Prince Philip was in a terrible trap, the desperado had caught him at a disadvantage, and that he was to be deliberately shot down without being allowed to make any sort of a defense, he now fully realized.

"Knock up his arm, Jim!—that's right!"

The quick utterance rung out sharp and decisive.

It came from Prince Philip, the instant following Mozeek's declaration that he would "send him to glory."

It was the boy's defense—tardy, but still in time to serve a ruse to secure the "drop" on his enemy.

The ruse worked, for Mozeek instinctively started, and glanced around.

The movement lost him the game, for Prince Philip's revolver leaped from his belt; there was a flash and a report, and Mozeek reeled backward with a shattered and weaponless right hand!

The prince, calm and cool, but with flushed cheeks and blazing eyes, backed toward the door, a six-shooter in either hand, ready for any who might dare to take up the fight in Mozeek's behalf.

Mozeek, howling with pain, shouted:

"I gits even fer this ef I hev ter clean out painters an' wildcats! I chaws up this measly citizen fu'st er last, don't yer never fergit that! I turns bis infernal hide ter taller ef it's ther last run I ever hez on ther range!"

"Never mind that!" retorted Philip, sharply. "I'll be at home when you call. But you'd better turn yourself over to Doc Dimity, and let this be a lesson to you. Next time Doc will not be able to do you any good."

No one made a move to champion Mozeek's cause. Not only was it dangerous to do so—for now that the youth was aroused and on his guard he might shoot to kill next time—but Tomahawk seemed to feel that the time was not ripe for him to personally show his hand. That would too surely expose the game, and, besides, he had other plans, and better ones, which were altogether in accord with his purpose.

"Thar's a future," he ground through his teeth to Apache Abe. "Mozeek makes a fizzle ov ther plan he cracks up, but thar be three what never fails, eh, pard? We regrets this hyer muss, but we hez vengeance shoar as time rolls."

The hubbub which followed Prince Philip's shot was now subsided. Tomahawk turned to the bar, and Mexican Jack got down and began to set out the glasses in anticipation of a rush. Mozeek swore at Doc Dimity and everybody else, and quieted down only when the pirate brought him a tumbler of whisky. Prince Philip, at the door, paused to remark:

"I wish to say again, gentlemen, that I had no trade with Mozeek, and I did not fleece him out of a cent. You saw that I shot only in self-defense, and every fair-minded man here will say that I have done nothing that was not exactly proper. Good-night, gentlemen."

The door closed behind him, and the roughs of

the Red Light were left to command or execrate him as they willed.

Prince Philip walked at a leisurely gait through the darkness, with his face to the south.

Far from smiling over his victory, he was serious and regretful.

"I had hoped to avoid an open war," he said to himself; "at least until—well, until the time came. Now I am handicapped by constant personal danger. I shall have to beware of the Thugs!"

"Still I am satisfied that Tomahawk does not suspect the truth. As a thorn in his side in the way of business he would like to have me put out of the way, and he may even—yes he may suspect the truth, but if his suspicion was well grounded he would never have tried as flimsy a scheme as that to get me out of the way; he would have resorted to methods more deadly and sure. He would have called those human bull-dogs who would have fastened themselves in my throat and hung there till my last breath. As it is now—well, now I have his absolute hatred, and he has doubtless marked me for poor Theo's fate. I must be on my guard, night and day, from this on."

"What if the old man should forget himself and tell—all that he should not? I must prevent that. I must see him again at once. I must stir his memory, and have the truth—more, all the truth. What if I am wrong in the belief that Tomahawk is the man? I must get at the bottom of the mystery, and now that I am threatened with trouble I cannot do it any too soon. It is all very strange and remarkable, and I do not pretend to understand everything as yet. But, nothing can shake me from the trail—noting! I have come too far, and there is too much at stake!"

From appearances, Philip was the only one abroad in the camp. All was dark and still. There was no moon. Even the stars were hidden, and but for the fact that he knew the way perfectly he must have lost his bearing.

As he neared his cabin he was all at once confronted by a figure that he recognized even in the darkness.

"Philip!" he was saluted, in a low voice. "This is Philip, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered. "Isn't it rather late for you to be out, widow?"

"I've been a-waitin' for you," was the reply. "I'm not usual about so late, but to-night there's pertik'ler reasons."

"So you wish to see me? I'm glad of that. I've wanted to know you better. The good women of the camp are so few that it's a double pleasure to know the best one. And every one says you are the best, widow."

"You be like all men to flatter, Philip," said the woman, in a tone that showed no ill-pleasure at his compliment. "No one regrets more than me that most o' my kind hyerabouts ain't all they ought to be. But I had good raisin', you see, way back in Indiana, by the kindest mammy ever wuz, and I ain't ever fergot her teachin's. Yes, I been a-waitin' hyer two hours, Philip."

"Then your visit must be important, sure enough," said the youth. "Come into the cabin, widow."

"No; I can tell you what I wants in less'n a minit, and then I'll hustle back to my own shanty. You see, I've taken a sort ov motherly int'rest in you, Philip, an' when I hears things like plos ag'in' you I take it as a bounden duty to tell you. Let's git out o' the street a little, so's as I won't be heerd. There'll be trouble fer me if I wuz heerd."

Philip led the way to a secluded corner by the cabin wall, and waited with the strongest curiosity for "the widdy" to make known her midnight errand.

The woman was one of the famous characters of the camp. She had accompanied her husband into the mines and had proved a true wife to him until one day, a year before our story, he had gone to Tucson to have a quantity of gold assayed, and had never returned. Whether he had been killed or had deserted his wife was a problem unsolved.

Mrs. Jake Hurley—that was her name—soon came to be known as "the widdy" in camp. But, that she had not given up all hope of her husband's return was evidenced by the fact that she was always promptly on hand when Eagle Jerry's stage rolled in, on the lookout for her recreant lord. There were some people unkind enough to insinuate that "the widdy's" purpose in meeting the stage was not so much to look for the lost Jake as it was to exchange smiles with the small but mighty Jerry; but of course this was a base calumny.

She was not bad looking, was the widow;

she had been a beauty in her day, and even now, at thirty-five, her charms were sufficient to win the covetous admiration of half the miners in Triple Butte. She was a little too stout to be graceful—indeed, she was as large as two of Eagle Jerry, as the unkind critics aforementioned remarked—but was amiable and good, and so everybody liked her and respected her, and there was not a man in the camp who would not have fought for her at the drop of the hat.

"As I said, I takes a motherly int'rest in you, Philip," she said, when they were off the street and out of danger of eavesdroppers, "an' so I comes to warn you ov some highly interestin' proceedin's I hears ov plotted ag'in' you. Him that they calls Monte, a shiftless critter as there be in camp, comes a-callin' on me this evenin' drunk, an' when I tells him to go away he only sets a-palaverin' ov ever' thing he knows, and finally he says: 'Better marry me, widdy, I be a-goin' ter be flush right awaay. We got Prince Philip spotted, me an' Tiny Pete hev. He's been a-buyin' an' a-buyin' ov gold till we reckons he's got a bonanza hid somewhere, an' we be a-goin' to hev it, ef we hez to break the cub in two.' An' a-palaverin' so, I soon saveys they mean to rob you first chance they git, right away, an' so I thinks I'll tell Philip to look out. This is why I waited, an' I'm glad to do ye the good turn, Philip."

"I'm very much obliged, I assure you, widow," declared Prince Philip, warmly. "I'll be on my guard, and I promise you they'll have cause to be sorry for any attempt on me or mine. Maybe I can do you a favor in return, some time. I hope so."

"There, Philip, never mind, my boy. I took to you right away, an' I likes you, an' that's enough for me. Fren's are fren's, an' you can allays count on Mrs. Jake. Good-night, Philip!"

They shook hands, and the widow, a moment later, had disappeared in the darkness.

Philip entered his cabin, but presently emerged with a dark object in his hand.

He walked swiftly down the street toward the outskirts of the town, until he came to the little stream which, further up, danced past Old Likely's door. Then all at once the dark object in his hand emitted a flood of light, which was thrown on the sand where the trail met the stepping-stones of the stream.

The youth bent forward and scanned the ground closely.

Suddenly an exclamation fell from his lips. His eye had fallen upon the imprint of moccasins in the sand. He knew well what the discovery portended.

"The Red Thugs have come!" he said, under his breath.

He was not aware that in the shadows beyond the stream a pair of baleful eyes took note of his every movement.

CHAPTER IV.

RED VISITORS TO TRIPLE BUTTE.

PRINCE PHILIP abruptly closed the slide of the dark-lantern, and, undisturbed, returned at a rapid gait to his cabin.

Inside, with the door closed, and the light turned on again, he began pacing back and forth in a brown study.

"I may need Captain Thunderbolt and his Legion sooner than expected," he muttered, as if revolving events and circumstances over in his mind. "There is much to be done now, and I have no hours to lose. This is the time that Theo would have been needed.

"It is plain enough that what is done I must do single-handed. What first? is the question. Ranch Robin or Tomahawk? Tiny Pete or the stranglers from the South?

"The long-fingered assassins think to come and go like shadows, unnoticed and unknown; but silhouettes on the walls of Ranch Robin, a broken feather in the coach, footprints in the sand—all have a story to tell, and that which to Triple Butte is a startling mystery, is a primer tale to the Thunderbolt spy.

"And Tomahawk! He is deep; he has the cunning of a fox; he is as vengeful and murderous as the Indians he and Apache Abe lived among long ago; but I shall be a thorn in his flesh that shall goad and torture him to his death!

"I have much to do—much to do. I must weave the web of evidence surely, carefully. It cannot be possible that I am on the wrong trail. If they are dead, where is the girl? I would take my oath she is not in Triple Butte. If I am on the right scent, and Tomahawk is the man, I believe I shall find her at Ranch Robin. If not, then the old man must tell—

must tell! Anyhow, once I get inside of Ranch Robin I shall learn something; I am sure of that. And I must go to-night, while the red guardians are away. Now that the chance has come at last, it must not be missed. But first—first, I must get the lay of the land here in camp. As for Tiny Pete, I'll pay him in good time for his treachery."

Prince Philip did not seem greatly disturbed by the intelligence that there was a plan to rob him on foot. Nevertheless, he made preparations for a very unpleasant reception for any intruders during his absence.

On the wall of the cabin nearly opposite the door there rested, on a peculiarly fashioned rack, a polished Winchester rifle of the latest design, a self-acting repeater, with its muzzles pointing full at the door and its stock planted firmly against the logs; by adjusting to the trigger a small wire cord, which passed through a pulley and connected with the latch of the door, the arrangement was such that any one forcing an entrance would inevitably fire the gun, not once but a number of times, and be riddled with bullets!

The device was one that the youth habitually resorted to for protection against a surprise while asleep at night, and now that he expected to be absent from the dwelling an indefinite time, and that, too, when he had reason to expect a burglarious attack, he found it a very satisfactory safe-guard.

Having bolted the door and attached the wire to the trigger, and assured himself that he was properly accoutered, he let himself out of the cabin by means of a trap door in the floor at the extreme rear of the room, and started at a swift walk toward the center of the camp.

He had gone barely ten yards when he heard his name called, and wheeling, he recognized a tall figure in the rough garb of a miner, with the word:

"Monte!"

"I wants ter see yer, Prince Philip," said the rough, drawing near.

"The boy's hand was on a weapon in his belt, but if Monte suspected the fact he gave no token.

"I thought you were taken in and done for at Mex's to-night," Philip remarked, with a sharp scrutiny of the desperado. "I saw you being tied up by Doc Dimity, and I got the idea that you and Tomahawk had not exactly agreed, with some disadvantage to yourself."

"By Jerusalem, yes!" was the reply in fierce tones. "We fell out an' we fell hard, an' ther durn galoot frum Dogtown proceeds ter stave me in. He nails my right paw ter ther table, and when I break in an' mashes his face he somehow, afore I see how it's done, places some cold lead near whar I lives. But I pulls through an' I sw'ars ter myself I gits even with this high-hoss ef et takes ter resurrection day. I hez been a straight pard o' Tomahawk's fer goin' on two year, but I swear he breaks us up ter-night, an' now I loses no time in gittin' even, you make no false play on *that*, boy."

"Tomahawk is a bad one to buck against, Monte," warned Philip.

"I knows that all right enough, fer ain't I got evidence hyer?" and Monte held up his bandaged hand and pointed to the white cloths about his head. "Tomahawk is a tornado, ez I'm full an' complete aware, but thar be men who ain'tafeerd ov even tornadoes. I notice you bucks ag'in' Tomahawk without no fear an' tremblin'."

"Well, I guess the big card-sharp and I are not exactly the warmest friends in the world," answered Philip, somewhat evasively.

"I jest hez this ter say, an' that's why I be hyer ter see you; any time you plays ag'in' thet high hoss count me in, an' I makes a deal what wins a number ov points. Thet's a go, ain't it, Philip?"

"Certainly."

"I takes in this game ag'in' yer ter-night, an' I sizes it up in line when I tells yer it wuz Tomahawk's play, fu'st an' last. He only puts Mczeek up fer some reason ez is not manifest. Thet's one thing I makes up my mind yer orte know."

"I knew it before."

"Yer did?"

"Yes; I caught on to it readily enough." "Pears ter me, frum what I see, yer ain't very fur ahind ther times, boy, an' I thinks you plays a winnin' hand. I backs you up, by Jerusalem, an' when yer knocks out Tomahawk we rides in a chariot at my expense! Fer two years I swore by thet Dogtown gopher, but now I rejoices ter see him duly done fer, an' you bet I takes a hand therat!"

Philip said nothing regarding Monte's late plans in connection with Tiny Pete, and neither did he mention the fact that Tiny Pete and he knew each other better than outward appear-

ances indicated—relations of the order that Monte was seeking to establish.

He did not linger longer, but with a parting word to Monte, after mutual assurances of future friendship, continued his way.

The same baleful eyes that had watched his movements at the stream were upon him as he stalked away through the darkness, but he was unsuspecting.

And Monte? Fateful words were those to which he had just given expression!

Five minutes' walk took Philip to the immediate neighborhood of a large and pretentious cabin near the center of Triple Butte, which was known, properly, as the "Hawk's Nest."

It was Tomahawk's abode.

There the chief of the gold camp's desperadoes lived in more style than any one else in the place could afford, or cared to afford, and there some of the biggest games of poker ever known in Arizona were played at times. Rich gamblers from Tucson had more than once come there to "clean out" Tomahawk, and had usually got cleaned out instead. And one man, more reckless than the others, who had been indiscreet enough to charge the host with using crooked cards, had the next instant expired with his body lying half across the stone threshold.

Promptness in such matters was a characteristic feature of the Dogtown desperado. Monte and others had reason to know this.

One of his peculiarities was that, unlike his associates, he never carried a weapon in sight; no one knew exactly where he did carry his arms, but certain it was that they appeared with marvelous celerity when required for use.

Tall and sinewy was this man Tomahawk, and a lion for courage. His face was sallow from a life of exposure, and his hair was black and straight and long. It was said of him that he had once made his home with the Apaches, in company with his pard, Apache Abe; and that was why he was contemptuously referred to as the "Dogtown gopher."

Tomahawk was at home. Prince Philip was not long in making the discovery. And he had company, which fact was no surprise to the young spy.

By pressing his ear against the weather-beaten clap-boards of the cabin he could faintly distinguish the murmur of voices within.

He crept softly toward a side window through which a single ray of light streamed, with the intention of getting a look at the midnight visitors, but just as he was cautiously raising his head to peer in, the light suddenly went out and he heard the door of the cabin open.

He dare not move away then lest he be heard, and so he crouched close to the wall and listened, his hands upon his weapons.

Four men came out of the cabin and walked leisurely toward Mex's place.

It was not so dark but that he could discern their outlines. Tomahawk was slightly in advance; the second was Apache Abe; the two others were Indians, tall and half-naked and with feathers in their hair.

The party were conversing in the Apache language, and Prince Philip could not understand what was said; but from Tomahawk's tone he appeared to be giving instructions about something, and he was answered with grunts of acquiescence.

The four, entirely unsuspicous of the presence of the silent spy, moved away up the dark street, and Prince Philip withdrew from his perilous concealment and went hurriedly back toward his own cabin.

He had just reached the spot where he had left Monte when he almost stumbled over a dark form on the ground.

He struck a match, and by its light peered down into an upturned face.

He was startled to recognize—Monte!

On the rough's throat was the unmistakable imprint of human fingers!

"The stranglers' work!" cried the Prince, holding the match close to the scarred neck.

Fifteen minutes later Prince Philip, mounted on a spirited horse, whose hoofs were muffled, rode away from Triple Butte toward the south.

"Now for Ranch Robin!" he said.

He knew not that he had a pursuer, velvet-footed and baleful eyed!

CHAPTER V.

THE SCARLET BLOODHOUND.

A MILE distant from Triple Butte the horse's hoofs were unmuffled, and the animal spurred to greater speed.

The gold spy seemed eager to arrive at his destination. He had been waiting for this opportunity for some time, and now he was resolved to make the most of it.

He did not look back. It would have done him little good, for the darkness was too dense.

He sat his saddle like a Centaur. The wind blew open his gold-fringed jacket, and stirred the curling black locks that clustered about his white temples. His chest expanded; his eyes sparkled; the fresh breath of the night seemed to whisper of victory.

Presently the clouds began to roll away, and the brilliant stars to one by one appear. But the moon had gone down. Had he not known the trail—he had been to Ranch Robin before—he must have experienced considerable doubt as to the correctness of his course.

In the rear of the youthful rider sped the tireless trailer, his moccasined feet giving forth scarcely the faintest sound as they fell in continuous rote on the indurate earth.

This individual, like the two who had talked to Tomahawk, was tall, half-naked and copper-skinned, and there were two or three torn and drooping eagle-plumes in his coarse hair. His eyes were blacker than the night, and their wild expression bespoke as plainly as words the soul of the savage.

He was verily a foe to flee from. He was more terrible than a skulking puma in pursuit of its prey. He was the incarnation of cruelty, of atrocity, of assassination.

Savage that he was, his lithe, sinewy body was too inured to the hardships of the trail for him to require a mount for the successful pursuit of the night-rider to Ranch Robin. Fatigue he knew not, and there was marvelous speed in his strong, bare limbs.

Three of a kind!—silent, pitiless, terrible, were they not truly foes to dread?

And Prince Philip, scarcely more than a boy, knew that not only they, but their master, and their master's friends, were arrayed against him, while he was obliged to fight his battles alone!

But the young spy had the courage of a veteran, and ere the night-runner could strike, he was galloping away to prosecute his mission in the very stronghold of the adversary.

Not only had he courage, but a cunning that matched that of even the most astute chief of the wily red race.

He proved that by the stratagem to which he resorted to discover and frustrate possible pursuit.

At a point where the trail narrowed, and was walled on either side by beetling crags, he drew rein, and dismounting, placed his ear to the ground and listened intently.

He could hear nothing.

Not to be deceived by this silence, he led the animal into a sheltered spot, and secured him, by means of the bridle-rein, to a sapling.

Then he threw himself to the earth beside the trail, and, at full length, lay and listened.

He had the advantage of knowing that his foes were all behind him, and that danger was to be expected only from that direction. Were they aware of his stealthy departure from the camp? Had sharp eyes followed him as he sped away to the south? Had his purpose been discerned—in a word, had he been pursued?

Perhaps the very personage whose dreadful grasp had destroyed Monte had spied upon his movements, and was slinking in his wake?

He could not exercise too much precaution.

It meant death to be surprised at Ranch Robin.

He believed that the red guards would not return there immediately, unless aware of the contemplated visit, for doubtless they had been summoned to Triple Butte for a purpose not to be accomplished in an hour, and if this purpose was what he suspected, they had not so much as begun their work. That it was of special importance it was easy to conclude, for their presence in the camp was attended with danger to the man who ruled them as a despot, and who was careful to keep the fact a secret from his townsmen, and consequently it signified more than a star-chamber confab in an incomprehensible language.

He had timed his visit to Ranch Robin well. The way was clear for hours to come.

But if pursued? Then alone did danger lie.

At least he would devote fifteen minutes to satisfying himself on that point.

He had purposely ridden at a high speed in order to distance a pursuer, that his stop might not be noted.

His sagacity was not defeated by impatience.

He watched and waited as a wild animal watches and waits for its prey, and the slightest sound had a significance that called for attention.

At last his patience was rewarded.

He heard the rapid footsteps of the red runner, and recognized the light shuffle of the moccasins. The identity of his pursuer was not for an instant a matter of doubt.

But, was there one pursuer, or two, or three?

One.

And with all this Indian's cunning, the ambush was not suspected!

He came on swiftly—nearer—nearer. Not a sound disturbed the stillness of the night, but the soft tap—tap of the moccasined feet.

The intrepid youth arose softly, and with a weapon in his grasp and his gaze penetrating the darkness, waited.

Like a young Ajax he stood, not a muscle quivering.

Suddenly the tall figure of the scarlet bloodhound loomed before him in the darkness, scarcely more than twenty paces distant, when the steed secreted among the rocks, as if scenting danger, moved restlessly.

The Indian heard the sound, and, startled, paused abruptly.

Then he saw the waiting youth, and comprehended, and without a sound, without so much as crouching as a beast does, he sprung at his young quarry.

Prince Philip fired, but the Apache did not even waver in his onward rush. His great swarthy body seemed to grow huge; his long arms were outstretched as if to grasp a victim.

The youth could almost feel an iron clutch at his throat.

He fired again—and again—not the eye, but instinct, directing his aim.

The mountain bloodhound swayed, lifted his arms spasmodically, and then fell headlong at the very feet of the dauntless spy!

One of the dread stranglers was forever past harming either the innocent or the guilty.

At once Prince Philip, with a long breath of relief, proceeded to action. He led forth his horse, which snorted and shied at the form on the ground, and a moment after he was galloping onward to Ranch Robin.

He was there in an hour.

Ranch Robin was not a ranch. It had once been one, beautiful and celebrated, when Major Weldon lived there, and his vast herds of cattle and horses roamed its ranges, but since Major Weldon's time the place had passed into decay.

Tomahawk, who was the major's successor, had preferred to live among his fellows in Triple Butte, and had long since sold or gambled away all the stock and let everything go to ruin.

The beautiful white house which Major Weldon had barely completed when overtaken by death, was weather-worn and dreary-looking, and it and the name were all that was left to mark the once thrifty and lovely Ranch Robin.

The place was generally supposed to be deserted, but Prince Philip had seen lights there, and shadows on the walls, and he knew that it had been the abode of three stalwart Apache Indians for some time past.

If other secrets it contained, he meant to find them out this very night.

Had he not assumed that he should find a girl there?

A girl at Ranch Robin! Impossible!

A captive, may be! Then Heaven protect her!

He rode without hesitation up to the door of the dilapidated building, taking the precaution, however, to hold a revolver ready for use at the first demonstration of danger.

He had barely drawn rein, preparatory to dismounting, when he heard the click of a rifle, and a dark figure appeared on the threshold!

CHAPTER VI.

AT RANCH ROBIN.

THE young spy knew instinctively that he was covered, and discreetly refrained from raising his six-shooter.

The man in the doorway was so protected by the darkness that it was impossible to discern his features until he advanced upon the visitor with the rifle still leveled.

Then Prince Philip saw that he was a Mexican, or at least a half-breed, for he had a dark face and was dressed in the costume of a Mexican cowboy.

He was low of stature, like the majority of his race, and his eyes glistened like a serpent's.

He gave Prince Philip a sharp scrutiny, and then:

"Bueno!" he said, almost inaudibly. "A Gringo—possibly a friend. Who are you?"

Philip was not quite prepared for this reception. He expected summary measures of some sort.

"I am Prince Philip, of Triple Butte," he an-

swered, promptly, leaning forward in his saddle.
"I am not here for trouble. Who are you?"
"Vasquez of Chihuahua," was the answer.

"A new-comer here, eh?"

"Si, señor."

"Are you alone?" asked the youth.

There was no answer to this. The bead-like eyes were still scanning him sharply, as if their owner was making up his mind as to the advisability of permitting a more intimate acquaintance.

The momentary silence which followed was broken by a voice from within the house, asking in Spanish:

"Quién es, Vasquez?" (Who is it?)

"He says his name is Philip, and he is from Triple Butte," replied the Mexican, also in Spanish, and without turning around.

"Is he friend or foe?"

"That I have not decided, padre. But a friend, I think."

"I will see him."

An elderly man, robed in the somber habiliments of a Catholic priest, came to the door, and stepped out to the side of Vasquez.

"Bueno noche!" he saluted, respectfully and amicably, as befitting his hly calling.

Philip replied in the same tone, repressing the surprise he felt at the strange meeting.

"I trust you will count me a friend," he added.

"Lower the weapon, Vasquez!" commanded the padre, when he had looked closely into the youth's face. "We are friends to all who are friendly," he continued; "but we are strangers in a strange country, and we know that there are lawless men here and numerous dangers. For special reasons we keep a strict guard."

"Yours is, of course, a peaceful mission," replied Philip, "and such being the case, I am certainly a friend."

"Perhaps you live in this place?"

"By no means. On the contrary, it is the home of enemies."

"There are evidences of Indians having been here, and recently."

"Yes, doubtless this very night."

"Their fire was still burning. We came late. We traveled by moonlight in order to reach this place, and have comfortable shelter for the night. We came from Mexico to see—to see friends. We expected to find them here. Vasquez acted as guide. He knew the way. We arrived about the time the moon went down. We were greatly disappointed. There was no friend here. But we were fatigued and at our journey's end, so we took possession, as you see."

"The place is not safe. You did well to be on your guard. The Indians who live here are red-handed assassins. They would have no respect for your gray hairs and your cloth."

"You talk like a friend, señor. Will you not dismount? Perhaps you can give us the information of which we stand in need."

Philip was interested, and curious to hear more of the padre's mission, and he readily accepted the invitation to dismount. As he was securing his horse to a post of the long dias which extended in front of the door, the priest asked:

"Do you think it probable the Indians will return soon? If so, we had best beware of them."

"It is just as well that Vasquez stand guard," Philip answered.

"I will do so, señor," said the half-breed.

"Will you come into the house, señor?" invited the padre. "I will stir the fire into a blaze, and we shall have some light. The truth is we are sorely in need of a friend. I believe you to be one, and I wish to ask you some questions of grave importance to us. We are troubled and in doubt."

As he spoke he was leading the way into the front room, where a fire smoldered on a stone hearth.

He placed some light wood on the coals, and they flamed up, partially illuminating the place.

The two then saw each other to better advantage.

The old priest had a kindly face, but one that indicated courage and determination. His black robes contrasted sharply with the pallor of his complexion, and Philip was pleased to see that he was an American.

The room was a large, square, airy apartment, and appearances suggested that it had once been cozily furnished; but now it contained little to recall the glory of dead days.

Scattered about were the blankets and trapings of Indian braves, pipes and provisions.

In one corner a handsome but soiled jacket of

navy blue met the youth's inquisitive glance, and at once his mind reverted to Eagle Jerry's description of the garb worn by the ill-starred passenger from Tucson. Beneath it, but visible, lay a wig and false beard, tangled and dirty.

The padre, who had been scrutinizing the face of his impromptu guest closely, interrupted the inspection by asking:

"If this is a stronghold of enemies why are you here?"

"I am chiefly in search of a lost person," was the reply. "There are reasons why I thought the person here, held a prisoner."

"You came to rescue then, señor?"

"Yes."

"The person is not here?"

"Of that I am not sure. I have not searched the premises."

The old priest seated himself on a low stool, and motioned to another near by, which Philip appropriated.

"Have you been long in this vicinity, señor?" he inquired.

"No, not long," was the answer. "I came from the East."

"But you are acquainted with the country?"

"Thoroughly, padre."

"Can you tell me if this is not the place once owned and occupied by Major Weldon?"

"It is."

"I am aware that Major Weldon is dead—murdered," said the priest impressively. "But, where is his wife?"

There were red spots in Philip's cheeks as he replied:

"She is dead, too."

The priest sprung to his feet in excitement, and then sat down again, shaking his gray head sadly.

"I feared it—I feared it. When I saw this ruined homestead I divined the truth. Then all our long journey is in vain, and the disappointment—the sorrow of—How did she die?" he asked abruptly, in a low tone.

"She was killed, too, I have been told, by one who knows, I think—cruelly maltreated, and finally brutally killed in a drunken rage."

"Horrible!" The old man clasped his hands and appeared to murmur a prayer.

"Yes, horrible!" echoed Philip. His eyes were flashing with restrained emotion.

"How long ago did it occur?" was the next question.

"About five years."

"And the same hand that slew the husband destroyed the wife, perhaps?"

"Doubtless the same."

There was a moment's silence.

Presently the padre said:

"There was another."

"Yes, a child."

"Do you—is it known what became of her?"

"No."

Again there was silence, and again it was broken by the priest.

"I will tell you," he said. "Possibly you may already know the circumstances which brought about the terrible affair at this hapless ranch, but, in a word, I will rehearse it. Major Weldon had built a comfortable home here, and had sent back to the East for his wife and little girl of ten—or at least so they supposed—that was seven years ago. When they arrived at Tucson they were met by a man who said that Major Weldon was ill and could not come himself, so bad sent him instead.

When the party arrived here this man informed the horrified wife that he had killed Major Weldon and had sent for her himself; that she must be his wife, and that he was now the owner of the place. The woman pleaded and defied the villain, but he swore that he would kill her, as well, if she did not obey him. As for the 'brat,' as he called the child, he did not wish it around, and straightway he sent the little one off in charge of a confederate to a Mexican mission, where, he said, he hoped she would stay and never bother him again. That, as I said, was seven years ago; if the good woman was killed five years ago, she must have existed for two long years under the brutalities of her captor. How horrible it is to think of it!"

"Go on" said Philip, in a strained voice.

"It was to my dear old mission in Chihuahua that the pretty child was brought," the padre continued. "That is a long way from here, señor. Well, she stayed there, you may be sure, and she grew good and beautiful. It was she who told me the things that I have just narrated to you. She pined always to see her mother again, and wept when she spoke of her. Yet she could not come, for it was dangerous, and she had no way to come. At last, señor,

she came to me, and falling on her knees, begged so hard that I take her to see her mother once again that I promised; for I had learned to love the girl as my own child, and I could not deny her. And so, señor, we were equipped for the journey, and I selected Vasquez, who knew the country, to guide and guard us, and we came—only to learn from your own lips that the poor mother has been dead these five years!"

It was now Philip who was on his feet with excitement. His face was white.

"Thank heaven!" he said devoutly, "that Phosa did not meet her mother's fate! I have had the most terrible fears! Good father, she is the person that I came to Ranch Robin this night in search of!"

The padre only murmured to himself, and looked at the youth with deepest surprise and interest.

"Part of what you have told me I had already managed to learn, in one way and another, but your revelation concerning the girl is like a lamp to the darkness. And so she is here! Where, padre? I must see her! She is in the next room, you say, tired out and asleep? Ab, but we must disturb her! It is not safe here. It might mean the death of us all to remain here until morning!"

"You are a friend in need!" said the old priest, kindly, rising and placing his hand on the boy's shoulder. "My charge is sacred, and we need advice and aid. I do not comprehend you—I do not understand why you should have been in search—and above all times, this night—of the girl whose life is so unfortunate, but I trust you, Philip. I will call her."

CHAPTER VII.

A ROW AT THE RED LIGHT.

HE went to a door in the rear of the room, and rapping smartly thereon, called, in a subdued but penetrating tone:

"Phosa! Phosa!"

Immediately there was an answer.

"Yes, Father Alonzo!"

"You must arise. There is a friend here. We are going to leave this place. You will come at once!"

"Yes, at once, good father!"

Philip's face was a study. He could not conceal his emotion. As the priest returned to him, he said:

"I thank you for trusting me. You will have no reason to regret it. When we get to a place of safety I will explain everything to you and to her. We three will have much to talk about. I promise you that you will be surprised. In the mean time, you should break the news of her mother's death to her. The sooner she knows the truth the better, for actual grief is not so bad as dreadful suspense."

"We must leave here immediately. I have no means of knowing when the Indians will return, and her life is too precious to take any risks. You are right in supposing this country full of danger, but I swear I will defend you, and I will secure you protection until such time as you are rested and ready to return to your people."

He went to the door, and said to Vasquez:

"We are to leave here at once. Will you bring the horses?"

The Mexican acquiesced, and started for the stables.

Philip quickly laid his plans.

"I have friends as well as enemies in Triple Butte," he thought, "and there Phosa will be safest. I have not forgot the assurances of the widow, and she can be depended on in a case of this kind. Ten and seven are seventeen, and Tomahawk, should he see Phosa now, might change his mind in regard to her. Tomahawk? Ah, that is a question she can settle quick enough, and I'll not have to depend on Old Likely now. This has been a night of nights, and I—well, I have much to be thankful for!"

As he walked back into the room, where the priest was making preparations for departure, the door of the inner room opened, and she who had been called Phosa came out, her eyes wide with curiosity and apprehension.

Father Alonzo had spoken truthfully when he called her beautiful.

Her face was fair and sweet, but with traces of tears upon it now, and there was a world of pathos in her great brown eyes. She was not too tall, but exquisitely molded, and her life in a convent had given her a quiet grace that was more than wianing. Her dress was of a dark-gray material made up in the simplest fashion, yet fitting her rounded figure perfectly.

As she appeared in the doorway, her very attitude was an inquiry.

Philip approached her at once, as Father Alonzo said:

"Phosa, this is our new friend. He gives his name as Philip."

She held out her hand with a faint smile, and Philip raised it to his lips.

He seemed unduly agitated, and his face flushed as their eyes met.

The priest began to explain the situation; Philip added the information that they were to ride to Triple Butte, where Phosa would be cared for by one of her own sex.

"It is too bad to disturb you, Phosa, when you are so tired from your long journey," he said, "but your safety demands it."

"I am not too tired for anything," she said, bravely. "I can ride wherever it is best to go."

"But you are not used to hardship," he smiled.

"For that reason I can endure it better," she returned.

By the time that Vasquez brought the horses to the door all was in readiness for the start.

Philip assisted Phosa to mount, and a moment later the party of four was riding away from Ranch Robin at a smart pace, their faces to the north.

The youth thought it best to avoid the regular trail, for fear of unpleasant meetings, and by making a *detour*, gained the Tucson trail, by which the dark journey into Triple Butte was safely accomplished.

Philip led the way through the silent camp to the cabin of "Mrs. Jake," whom he quickly aroused, and who, on understanding the situation, was overjoyed to be of assistance. She kissed Phosa, and they were friends at once.

The cabin was sufficiently large to accommodate all three of the strangers, and after admonishing the priest and the widow that it might be just as well to keep the presence of the party in Triple Butte as secret as possible, Philip returned to his own cabin to rest and sleep, happy and exultant over the events of the night.

But it seemed that he was to have neither rest nor sleep that night.

As he rode quietly and meditatively through the darkness he suddenly heard a pistol-shot, which seemed to come from the interior of Mex's joint, where the lights were still burning brightly.

Curiosity prompted him to an investigation.

The crack of the six-shooter was not so unusual a sound in Triple Butte, and especially at the Red Light, that it possessed any particular significance; but Prince Philip was not one to miss any performance that promised the slightest interest. The lateness of the hour suggested that the present row, if such it was, was of an uncommon order, and worth seeing.

He dismounted and secured his borse, and made his way swiftly and silently to a point of observation where he could not only see, but could hear, all that was going on in the notorious resort.

Only two men were there—Tomahawk and Mexican Jack.

The latter was behind the bar, in a shrinking attitude, while the big champion of the Red Thugs leaned over the liquor-stained counter toward him, with an expression of ferocity on his coarse face.

He had evidently been indulging in some pistol practice at the yellow-faced tough's expense, for the great square mirror which hung back of the pyramids of bottles and glasses, and which was the pride and joy of its owner, had a round hole in the center, which could only have been made by a bullet. The big revolver in Tomahawk's hand indicated the source of the mischief.

"I'm in prime humor ter tear this place down," he was saying in mad tones, "an' ter tear you in ribbons along ov it. What kind ov a game is this yer springs enter me all at once? Ain't yer fer knowin' I can't be worked no more ner a cyclone can be sarcumvented? So you be a-goin' ter give my snaps away ter ther Thunderbolt skunks ef I don't make yer a present in calico? Waal, I only says this, my pestiferous Greaser, I breaks you squar' an' quick in two at ther fu'st squeal yer makes, and that'll be no findin' ov ther pieces; none whatever."

"You never would 'a' thought o' ther gal ag'in ef I hadn't mentioned 'er," Mex found voice to reply.

"What's that ter yer," was the fierce response. "S'pose I had fergot 'er, an' fergot that young gals grow up, that's no reason wherefore any hay-colored gopher frum Greaser-land comes by an' bluffs me inter givin' ther prize away. I merely observes ther idea, and I appropriates ther prize myself, thankin' yer fer ther pleasin' suggestion. But what I blows up on is this hyer scheme ter teach on me ter ther infernal est

set ov foes a man ever could hev; no one but a yeller-livered, mangy, kiote-nibbled, greasy cub ov a Rio Grande squaw would put up that sort ov a deal on an old pard! Now I preaches yer a small sermon what yer be durn car'ful not ter fergit, an' that is, I ain't made ov ther stuff what kin be bluffed, none whatever, an' any ideas you cherishes ter the contrary don't live up with fax. You tells me this hyer Philip is a Thunderbolt spy, thinkin' I scares; but I don't scare fer a durn. I only spots this same Prince Philip an' lays him cold, fer I guesses right in unison that he aren't ther right sort o' citizen, wherefore I takes no chances. But right that is whar your usefulness stops."

"Mebbe you'll change yer mind about that," said the Mexican.

The remark was an unfortunate one. Tomahawk construed it into a threat, and already enraged as he was, it was quite sufficient to bring the row to a culmination that was as unpleasant as it was salutary.

Tomahawk's long arm shot over the bar, and ere the startled Mex could dodge or escape he was seized in a grip of steel; then he was dragged, like so much wheat, across the bar, gathered up and held aloft, and finally buried, with the power of a catapult, head-first through the nearest open window.

After which feat, Tomahawk helped himself to a drink, and Prince Philip withdrew.

"Things are getting lively in Triple Butte," the young spy mused. "There'll be some red-hot times here shortly. I know what to expect now if the presence of the girl is known. And they suspect me? Well, I must look out for trouble, that's plain. As if there were any doubt that Tomahawk is the man! The last links in the chain will soon be forged!"

When he reached his cabin and entered by the secret door, he struck a light and examined the rifle which was contrived for the protection of his property while he was absent.

Three of its cartridges had been fired.

He had been visited while he was not at home. However, for obvious reasons, his belongings had not been disturbed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COUNCIL OF TWO.

TRIPLE BUTTE slept late the following morning. The place was like an owl's nest in its fashion of turning night into day.

The day was an eventful one.

The first excitement was the finding of Monte's body, with the telltale finger-marks in the throat.

Monte had not been the valued friend of anybody in particular, and, so far as his loss was concerned, that was easily survived; but the manner of his death was what caused the sensation.

The silent Thugs that were preying on Triple Butte were giving such frequent and terrible evidence of their presence and purpose, that the fear and indignation of the camp was aroused to the depths, and it was the common decision that these numerous assassinations demanded investigation and merciless retribution.

Steps must be taken to protect life, for no man could say that he should not be the next to feel the grasp of the dread stranglers, and in consequence, there was an almost universal feeling of uneasiness and apprehension.

Who were these Thugs, and whom were they warring against? What secret motive prompted their atrocious crimes?

Nobody seemed to know.

A few connected the trouble between Tomahawk and Monte with the latter's death, but when Tomahawk appeared and denounced the assassins in unmeasured terms, and swore in loud tones that he would avenge his pard, the lurking suspicion that he was in any way responsible for the murder was dismissed.

"Monte an' me hez some trouble at the Red Light, when somebody hez an ace more ner is in ther cards, but we settles it then an' thar like gents, an' thar's no hard feelin's," said the big rough, ostentatiously. "Us two hez been pards too long ter hev more'n a passin' diffikelty, what we fergits when we sleeps off Mex's hot p'izen. I mourns this man true an' straight, an' I makes gravy ov ther galoot er galoots what called ther turn on 'im in ther dark. This throat-fingerin' ain't ter my taste, none whatever, an' I votes we stops it short an' sudden."

All this talk about tracing the crime and adopting methods of defense amounted to nothing more than talk, however, and the hours passed without any one advancing a practicable theory or taking any action.

The spot where Monte had been found was an exceedingly rocky section, and no footprints

were visible; but later in the day somebody reported the discovery of moccasin-tracks in another portion of the camp, and straightway the belief was established that the Thugs were Indians, or else white men who wore Indian shoes for purposes of stealth.

Thus matters rested.

Monte was buried in that popular annex to the burg known as the "boneyard," and everybody made the burial an excuse to drink to his safe passage to paradise.

Tomahawk and Mex spoke as usual, and seemed to have buried the hatchet; indeed, the Red Light boss was more gracious than ever before, and seemed anxious to restore their cordial relations. Knowing all that he did, the death of Monte had an uncomfortable significance, and notwithstanding his bruises and the broken mirror, he was not long in convincing himself that it would be a good thing to placate his powerful foe of the preceding night.

Tomahawk appeared to hold no grudges, and so none of the crowd suspected that the two had engaged in a personal encounter only a few hours before.

But the big gambler was in a sullen mood, generally supposed to be on account of Monte's death, but in reality for a very different reason.

When he and Apache Abe had secluded themselves in a private room in the back part of the Red Light, and were seated at a rough deal table with a black bottle between them, he gave free vent to his true feelings.

"I don't know why er wherefore Monte gits his dose, but I bets my pile 'twuz fer good an' sufficient reasons, an' tharby we abides. Monte cut no great figger fer good on earth, ez I could ever see, an' I ain't a-waterin' my whisky with tears in his behalf—none whatever. Them Injuns hez the'r orders ter squeeze any clam-eyed scrub what don't talk through a face when a-speakin' ov the'r lord an' master, an' I loses no time guessin' that this hyer deceased Monte shot off his mouth at a durned onfortunit moment, wharby he loses caste direct in this community. This allowin' fer no mistakes or identity, which don't count none an' calls fer no grief.

"What breaks me up, Abe, I hyer communicates straight at once, an' that be, our red pard Snake Foot is found dead somewhat afore daylight on ther ranch trail—dead an' cold, an' no letters ov explanation tharabout."

"The deuce yer say!" Apache Abe ejaculated.

"I rehearses fax only," Tomahawk assured, gravely. "When ther three bucks come inter camp las' night, yer know Long Knife and Tiger Face says Snake Foot holds ther fort down thar by ther trail at ther crick, makin' sure no pestiferous cuss goes out ter Ranch Robin without a-known' whereof he thinks ter locate. It wuz Snake Foot what lays Monte low, down thar, so Long Knife makes assert when he comes back this mornin' a-rappin' ov me up an' a-sayin' him an' Tiger Face makes a find on ther trail, 'cause neither o' them do up Monte, which stiff they sees on the way out. 'What fur wuz Snake Foot on ther trail home ahead o' you?' I says ter this Long Knife, and he says, 'He trails a duffer a-horseback, jedgin' by ther tracks.' 'An' this duffer he starts a lead-mine in yer pard?' I says. 'That's it!' says he. 'Don't know who he wuz?' says I. 'No,' says he. 'Waal,' I says, 'you strike out fer home an' look sharp fer Eagle Jerry ter-night, ez yer started, an' find who this duffer is what salts down Snake Foot, an' we'll make merry hyer bimeby! Sayin' which, he trots off, an' right hyer is whar I becomes an ornament solely, so far ez hevin' any useful information is consarned."

Apache Abe's reply was an oath.

"Who could ther kiote hev been, Tommy?" he added.

"We only guesses at that at present, Abe," was the answer. "But I makes oath I finds out, an' I jerk his beef high! I'm r'iled clean down ter my toes over this hyer outrage, an' I'm out fer gore. Wherefore I makes one guess and retires, and that be Prince Philip."

"I thinks ov him likewise," said Apache Abe, reflectively. "I spots him like a bull's-eye."

"Mex an' me hez a small set-to last night, an' in ther course of his chin music he sings out this Philip is a Thunderbolt spy, ez viewed frum a Greaser standpoint; whereat I scoffs none, agreein' thereto somewhat. Tiny Pete says ther same ov him. Still we gits no proof ez yet, only we holds his post mortem on general principuls. Ther Injuns failed to find 'im last night."

"Ho's durn car'ful ter see ther stage corpus gits a place in ther resurrection yard."

"An' he's durn car'ful about showin' his int'rest therein," said Tomahawk. "He plays a fine Italian hand, but I thinks we sees his play. He knows that corpus wuz a Thunderbolt's ez quick

Prince Philip, the Camp Spy.

ez we did, er I goes astray complete. We don't consider proper whatever when we allows Mozeek ter tackle this young torpedo. Wherefore we rectifies that on ther next deal, an' plays trumps."

"It wuz Snake Foot what closed in on ther Thunderbolter, wuzn't it?"

"Them wuz Snake Foot's fingers on his windpipe," was, the response. "It wuz a slick, clean job, an' ther Injun got nothin' more than a bloody mouth. But he draws back pay on ther trail las' night. Perhaps this hyer Philip thinks he's avenged his Thunderbolt pard."

"Ef Philip is true a spy he'll turn ther whole herd ov wildcats onto us durn quick ef he hain't corraled."

"We makes no mistake about that, Abe, wherefore we corrals him quick, a-takin' ov no chances. Anyhow we kin expect trouble shore; ther Thunderbolts bears nothin' ov this pard they send hyer, an they comes on ter investigate. See? That's why I'm so all-fired pertickler that ther red pards watch the stage back in ther range; they recognize every man frum tha herd ov wildcats, disguised er not, an' they sees we hez protection. They hez eyes that read right through, an' they can't be fooled none whatever."

"We'll clean 'em out ef they come hyer, Tommy!"

"Clean 'em out? Waal, I think so, Abe. Ef they come one or two at a time we'll only see 'em with deep creases under the'r chins. Ef they come in a gang we fights like Satan, an' we plants 'em deep where they kin hear ther daisies growin'. We knows 'em every one, and so does ther red pards, an' we gathers 'em in similar ter persimmons. Ef this hyer Philip is a Thunderbolt he's new, wherefore he fails ter size 'im up et first sight."

"Triple Butte hez dropped onto the fact that thar is moccasins in camp, an' thar'll be trouble ef ther pards are found at Ranch Robin. Mebbe yer hadn't thought ov that, Tommy?"

"Yes, I think ov that, an' I don't fergit, neither, that ther gopher what done up Snake Foot is a-knownin' a durn sight more'n he ort ter. I violates no confidence, Abe, when I avers we're a-goin' ter bev ter fight. Ther job ov regulating the livers ov this community is a durn big one, but we does it, all prime an' swift."

"Thar's one thing a-troublin' ov my brain," said Apache Abe, after a short silence, during which the two drained their glasses, "an' that is, what fer these Thunderbolters be a-comin' hyer? What sort ov fish are they baited fer? Can it be they rakes up old scores about Ranch Robin?"

"No!" declared Tomahawk, forcibly. "More likely they're arter the'r red pards. Wherefore it occurs ter me we gits 'em away frum the ranch, which ther findin' ov 'em thar will be onpleasant fer us. I thinks I goes out an' burns the durn place out, and lets the two do the'r smokin' and stretchin' up in the mountains. By the way, Abe, you calls up a scheme I cherishes since last night. Yer knows that feminine kid what you carries somewhat ov eight year ago down ter thet Mexican branch o' heaven! Waal, I notes that time rolls round an' thet brat gits big enough ter be interestin', purty, mebbe, an' rattlin' fine an' choice, whereat I covets her society. How's this, Abe?"

"I plays my last chip on thet scheme!" Abe declared enthusiastically, seeing the drift of Tomahawk's remarks at once. "Durn ef I hadn't clean fergot that young 'un."

"Waal, I ponders this idee, somewhat," the big desperado continued, "an' I concludes thet caliker at present in this burg makes me sick, an' I imports a fresh love. Which thet same being my own adopted darter, whereat none whatever disputes my rights. Now, Abe, I leaves it ter you ter git this damsel in sight. You took 'er thar an' you kin bring 'er back—an' I wants 'er brought safe, too; I makes a ham sandwich ov thet man what quotes, love ter her afore me."

"I votes fer you, straight, Tommy," said Abe, warmly. "I hea'e thet human in sight by fast Express, an' we all gits drunk forthwith ter celebrate, eh, Tommy?"

"Wherefore all this surprise, Mex?"

The door had suddenly opened, and Mexican Jack entered hastily.

"I hez an old acquaintance out hyer a-takin' a drink, Tomahawk," he said. "He jest blew in frum Chihuahua, an' he drops around not expectin' ter see an old pard. So we fergits old scores an' hez a few drinks tergether, at which he confides that he guides inter town thet very identical gal, as I believes, what we converses on last night. Prince Philip's got 'er located at the widdys. I

passes yer this snap ter make things squar', pard."

Tomahawk and Apache Abe looked astonishment into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

PRINCE PHILIP demonstrated anew his disposition to keep to himself his knowledge of men and things in Triple Butte, for he recognized the fact that as yet discretion was the better part of valor; so, as far as he was concerned, the camp continued in the dark regarding the moccasin-tracks and the death of Monte.

The young spy was early astir, and busy.

Before noon he had a long conference with Phosa and the old padre, during which he made to them certain revelations that caused general surprise and rejoicing.

Inasmuch, however, as these revelations conflicted with his plans in another direction, he enjoined strict secrecy upon the two for the present.

Plans for their future movements were also discussed, and Phosa was asked if she desired to return to her old home in the East, or preferred to go back to the Mission in Mexico.

She did not hesitate in replying.

"I love Father Alonzo with all my heart," she said, "and I shall never forget all his kindness; but I should be happiest with you, Philip, in the old home."

The old priest shook his head sadly, but acquiesced in her decision, saying:

"I would not put so much as a word in the way of your happiness, little girl. I will stay with you here while danger surrounds you, and when you are safely on your way to your people, I will return to the dear old place that has known me for so many years."

Philip and Phosa talked together a long time, and the youth heard from her own lips the story of her young trials and inhumanities that had made her an orphan. She wept bitterly on learning of her mother's death, but the long separation of mother and daughter lightened the blow somewhat.

"Only a few weeks ago I came here knowing nothing and almost hoping for nothing," Philip said, "and now I know everything. From a few disjointed facts I got from an old character known as Old Likely, I got on the right trail, but I was not sure that this man Tomahawk was the murderer. Old Likely seemed to have a terrible fear of telling, for when I asked him he would cover his mouth with his hand and mutter strangely, and I could get nothing more out of him. Tomahawk must have threatened him. There are others who know the story, but they are all sworn pards of Tomahawk, and it was dangerous to ask them too many questions. One of these, however, known as Tiny Pete, agreed to tell me some things, but what the widow told me of his intention to rob me leads me to distrust him. Anyway, I have no further use for him now."

"When are we to leave this place, Philip?" asked Phosa.

"Very soon, I hope," was the reply. "I wish to get you out of this wild country as soon as possible. Now that I have found you, I must not lose you again. In the mean time, I am sure that the widow will take the best care of you. Won't you, widow?"

And the good dame, who hustled into the room at that moment, said "yes, she would," quite heartily, and kissed Phosa tenderly.

At this moment the front door was unceremoniously thrown open, and in stalked no less a personage than Tomahawk!

There was surprise all-around—Tomahawk to see Prince Philip, evidently, and the quartette to see Tomahawk.

The party were, of course, serenely unconscious of the mischief wrought by the vaquero, Vasquez, in confidence begot of liquor at the Red Light.

But that Tomahawk was not ignorant of the situation, and intended his advent as a surprise, was apparent from the fact of his entering the house without knocking, or giving any premonitory evidence of his presence.

The widow's guests started to their feet, Prince Philip angry at the intrusion, and Phosa slightly pale at sight of the author of all her woes.

"Howdy," said the burly desperado, with attempted pleasantry. "You wuzn't expectin' a visiter, eh?"

"No," was the youth's quick response. "What do you want here, Tomahawk?"

"Don't be pert, son," said the desperado, calmly, and then he allowed his gaze to rest on the new beauty of the camp.

A gleam of intense admiration flashed from his dark orbs.

She was fairer by far than her mother had been—fairer than his wildest fancy had pictured her.

To think that he could have forgotten the existence of such as she!

Why, she ought to have been brought to Triple Butte two years ago!

Give this wonderful creature to Mexican Jack? Well, hardly.

Triple Butte had never known anything like her. Her equal was not in all the great Southwest. Tucson itself would have gone wild over her.

He remembered well enough now that as a child she had been pretty. But he did not like "brats," and had got rid of her in short order. He had not thought of her in years until Mex made his unfortunate proposition.

And now—here she was, right at his hand! What a coincidence! No sooner thought of than she was here! There was no difficulty in recognizing her—she resembled the mother too closely for there to be any possibility of a mistake.

He looked upon her as his. Wasn't her mother his wife? Wasn't he her step-father, therefore her lawful protector? He would fight to the hilt for such a jewel as she. And, by Jove! here was the priest to marry them, without any ado! To Tomahawk it seemed that everything had been arranged especially for his pleasure and convenience.

Tomahawk had acted promptly on receiving the intelligence that the girl was at the widow's, and had gone straight to Mrs. Jake's to learn the truth of the report. He was surprised and ill-pleased to find Prince Philip there; but he mentally resolved that he would brook no interference from this hated youngster. He would relieve his red minions of a certain duty, concerning which he had instructed them, if necessary! He would take Prince Philip's disposal into his own hands, even if, by so doing, he did antagonize the better element of the camp.

"I hopes you hezn't forgot yer father—er—Phosa," he said, recalling the name of the girl with some difficulty. "How purty ye've growed to be! I guesses ther gospel-slinger treated yer bang-up, but, ov course, thar's no place like home, an' yer wanted ter come back. Waal, ye'r welcome, an' I'll make yer queen o' the camp forthwith!"

His evil eyes danced with brutish pleasure as he addressed her. The audacity of the man was remarkable. He presumed that his authority was unquestioned, and that no one would dare oppose his purpose.

Prince Philip's eyes were flaming.

He advanced a step and faced the Dogtown desperado, and his tones as he spoke were a terrible threat.

"No insults here, Tomahawk!" he said. "I am present to protect this girl against you and your infernal hell-hounds, and the man who crosses this threshold unbidden does so at the risk of his life! You have no right here, and I command you to go!"

The big tough never looked more formidable and ferocious than he did at that moment, when he drew himself up to his full height and glared down at his youthful foe with scorn and rage.

"Who says this?" he uttered, in a savage voice. "Who give you ther right, son, ter interfere in ther affairs ov father an' darter?"

"I have a God-given right!" was the youth's reply. "That is enough for you to know now. This girl is bere under my protection, and that means that the man who contaminates her with his touch dies by my hand! I don't want trouble with you now, Tomahawk, but I swear that if you persist in your devilish purpose I will send a bullet through your head!"

The desperado noticed for the first time that Prince Philip held a revolver in his hand, and the whole attitude of the youth betokened danger.

"See hyer, Philip, you makes a mistake yer deep regrets in the sweet hyer after," said the tough, in more amicable tones. "This leddy is my darter, whereof I hez ther right ter protect 'er an' take 'er in my charge. Thar's funeral expenses fer ther man what disputes that!"

"When you say that she's your daughter, or that you have any claims whatever upon her, you lie like Satan himself!"

"Be car'ful, boy! You fergits this is Tomahawk!"

"No, I don't forget. I'll not forget you the longest day I live! And by heaven, you'll not forget me! I could shoot you down with pleasure where you stand, Tomahawk; I hate you as an angel bates Tartarus!"

"Ye'r over-excited about somethin'. Thar's no wharfere fer al'y pertick'ler muss hyer. I takes ther leddy, an' ef you has anything ter say about it yer kin find me at Mex's place 'most any time. Come hyer, Phosa!"

The girl shrunk back at the command, and drew close to the sternly erect figure of Father Alonzo, who had not said a word, but who looked ready to defend his charge with his life, if necessary. He had readily recognized, from the conversation, that Tomahawk was the man who had ruled and ruined Ranch Robin.

The widow sat speechless in a corner.

"Come hyer, Phosa!" repeated Tomahawk, with astounding effrontery.

"You will save me frum him, Philip?" gasped the girl.

"Save you?" Philip almost laughed. "A dozen Tomahawks could not touch you when I had the drop as I have now!"

The desperado ground his teeth.

"This settles your doom, Philip!" he hissed.

"I thought you had settled it before!" was the reply. "I have been marked for assassination ever since. But go, Tomahawk! This is not the time and place for a settlement of our differences. That will come in the near future, and in the mean time there need be no beating about the bush: we are open enemies henceforth, and it's war to the knife! I understand that perfectly. Now go! Don't you see that I've got the drop, and don't you know that I can split a hair with a bullet?"

Tomahawk seemed to hesitate, and then he wheeled about and went to the door.

He said nothing, but the look in his eyes and the grim smile on his lips spoke a warning for the future.

He would be back.

His confidence of ultimate triumph was unshaken, and next time—

Well, there might not be any Prince Philip to stand in his way.

Tomahawk was aroused.

This meant that there was a lion loose in Triple Butte.

CHAPTER X.

TOMAHAWK EXPLAINS.

THE Dogtown desperado brought up at the "Hawk's Nest," where he spent a half hour in reflection, and was presently joined by Apache Abe.

Tomahawk had matured certain plans, which he was now ready to communicate and put into execution.

Apache Abe was therefore welcome.

There was a look of inquiry on his face as he entered the cabin.

"Waal?" he said.

"Waal," replied Tomahawk, "I sees this calico critter, an' I goes her one better, afore midnight. She's a reg'lar mountain daisy, Abe!"

"I remember what a cute little thing she wuz seven year ago when I carried her through the hills to the old Mission," said Abe. "I s'pose she's blossomed out now inter a gorgeous flower."

"You bet!" declared Tomahawk. "This durn burg will go stark mad over her, else I knows not whereof I spins my rope."

"She wuz at ther widdys', eh?"

"Yes, Mex was right."

"Wuz ther priest thar?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you bring 'er along, Tommy?"

"Bring 'er? Jerusalem!" said Tommy, disgustedly.

"Waal, why not?"

"Prince Philip wuz thar, a-standin' behind a gun."

"Had ther drop, eh?"

"Yes."

"Waal, what ov it? Thar's a future," said Abe, philosophically, after an instant's silence.

"Seems ter me thet feller is durn promisc'us, thet's all," was the response.

"Thar ain't no haste, ez I kin see. We give thet calf a little more rope, an' then we hez some choice veal cutlets, wherefore he's not on deck ter object ter your love-makin'."

"Ov course. But whar I don't see straight is how this tenderloin falls in with this party an' comes a-swearin' by the girl this way. Seems ter me, Abe, it's durn suspicious this young torpedo an' ther gal come up simultan'ous-like, two buds a-bloomin' on ther same bush, so ter speak. Looks like twuz a put-up job, and I fer one am a-goin' ter investigate."

"What do yer suspect?"

"Oh, nawthn'," said Tomahawk, evasively. "I only casts a reflectin' eye about."

"Why not ask ther Greaser guide what confides ter Mex?"

"Mex says he gits skeered an' closed shut on all partick'lers. Anyhow, he knows nawthin' about this hyer Philip. I wants ter know all about this tender youthlet, Abe. I catches on from his discourse that he hez a bill ag'in' me fer settlement, whereas I wants ter git aware ov ther items on account thereof. Never mind what I suspects, Abe. But I finds out some things all prime and quick."

Tomahawk here abruptly changed the topic of conversation.

"Abe, thar's a-goin' ter be war in this camp, fer I smells it in the air. Ez I told you afore, ther Thunderbolts may sneak in this way a-lookin' fer the'r pard, an' they may do this sneakin' at an unexpected moment. We've got ter git ther old pards together an' be ready fer defense. Explain ther situation, an' swear 'em over ag'in. I makes a point we tells 'em ov ther red chokers, fer ez it stands now thar ain't more'n five, countin' you an' mean' Mex, what knows whereof these Injuns gits the'r backin'. S'pose this hyer Triple Butte rose up in line ter wipe out ther reds, we finds half ther pards a-joinin' in an' a-goin' around half-cocked, ready ter drop ther Injuns at sight. This ain't right, none whatever, and I moves we hez a meetin' an' enlighten the'r populace."

"Won't thar be some kickin' on Monte's demise? He's been one o' ther pards fer two year."

"I'll fix that," was the reply. "Every one knows Monte an' me hez trouble, an' I makes oath he wuz about ter peach on ther crowd ter the Thunderbolts, whereof his sudden change of residence. Anyhow, thar ain't nobody what weeps fer Monte hyerabouts. Abe, I delegates you ter notify the'r boys ter meet hyer. We hez this confab afore Eagle Jerry gits in, an' we poses at ther Red Light in a body ter see ef any more corpses arrive. Then I takes a trip ter Ranch Robin, and when I gits back we makes a last play fer the'r Philip, and I begins my honeymoon."

The big desperado chuckled, and slapped a bronze hand on Abe's shoulder.

"Abe," he said, looking his big pard in the eyes, "ther man what makes love ter the'r human afore me I straight converts to a small grease-spot."

"Ov course," said Abe. "I'm goin' ter the Red Light now, Tommy. I'll hev ther pards byer on time."

Apache Abe went out the door, but he had not gone far when Tomahawk joined him. Together they strode up the street to Mex's joint.

The word was soon passed around that there was to be a secret meeting at the "Hawk's Nest" of Tomahawk's new and old pards, and at a stated hour the best dwelling in Triple Butte was the scene of as tough a gathering as the Arizonian mountains ever contained.

Tomahawk and Apache Abe were the most conspicuous figures, and then there were Doc Dimity, Mczeek, Cap'n Toddy, the Pirate, Tiny Pete—terribly wounded, and staggering as he walked—Lengthy, Mexican Jack, Bowie-knife Dan, Ben Bravo, Silver-tip Steve and a half-dozen others.

Nearly a score, all told.

"What's the matter with Tiny Pete?" was a general inquiry.

The wounded rough looked as though he might have been in a battle; he had no less than three bullet wounds on his person.

Even to a casual observer it was evident that he was in a critical condition.

"Who's been a-doin' ov you up in this fashion, Tiny?" Tomahawk inquired earnestly. Tiny Pete had always been a favorite with the toughs of Triple Butte, and his condition aroused the ire of every man present. Even Mex, who had been of late on bad terms with Tiny, forgot his grievances and grew grave over the case.

The wounded man sunk into a chair and met the scowling gaze of his pards with flashing eyes.

"Who do you suppose?" he answered. "Waal, you needn't guess; I'll tell you. Last night I makes a call on this galoot, an' without a word o' warnin', without even askin' what I wants, he opens fire an' sends three bullets inter my system afore I could turn an' git away. How's thet fer a coward's trick? I only hez strength ter crawl across ter my cabin, an' thar I lies till one o' the boys come by an' I got 'im ter bring Doc Dimity an' dress me up. I thought I wuz done fer."

"But who wuz ther skunk, Tiny? We'll avenge ther dastard trick! We'll wipe out ther score in blood!"

A flush of the deepest rage mounted to Tiny Pete's pale cheeks.

"Prince Philip!" he answered. "Thar never wuz a galoot ez mean ez he!"

"Prince Philip?" echoed the group.

"Yes, ther durn pryn' sneak frum sunrise. I knows fer a fact thet Prince Philip is a Thunderbolt spy, an' I wants ther man what claims ter be a pard o' mine ter prove it by shootin' thet maverick on sight!"

"Thar's not a man hyer who ain't willin' ter prove thet way thet he's a pard, Tiny."

"Thet's not the only blood that Prince Philip hez shed in Triple Butte," cried Mczeek. "Didn't he criminally assault me at Mex's last night? I've sworn ter git even fer that!"

"Don't you waste no brain tissue worryin' over this hyer, Tiny," said Tomahawk, sympathetically. "We avenges you sure afore sunup. It wuz a dirty coward's trick ter shoot you down in sech style, an' we ropes thet maverick shore ez death! Now you pards hear me while I outlines a few things somewhat. S'pose when you go up ter Mex's fer a cocktail ter-morrer mornin' you runs across Prince Philip, stiff, with blue creases under his chin?"

No one answered this query. It did not seem to be quite understood. They knew what those terrible creases meant, but not what Tomahawk was driving at.

"Shoot ag'in, pard," said some one.

Tomahawk hit the bull's-eye next time. He went straight to the point.

"Thar's no one hyer what ain't aware thet that's people hyerabouts what bez an onpleasant way ov gittin' men by ther throat an' squeezin' 'em, an' some ov you bez an able-bodied idea thet these champion-chokers are Injuns, seein' as how thar wuz moccasins in ther camp las' night; waal, I hyer makes affidavit, clean an' proper, thet they be Injuns shore enough—three ov 'em, er two now, fer one wuz thrown cold on ther Ranch Robin trail las' night. I further confides ter you, pards, in secret hyer, thet these reds are ole pards ov mine an' Apache Abe's, an' thet they're in this district in my employ. You all knows Abe an' me spends some years among the red-skins, whereof we gits our present names, and it comes about thet when we needs some protection hyerabouts, we draws on our account with the'r Injuns fer these bucks what are expert with the'r fingers. I tells you all this so thet thar shall no longer be any secrets whatever between us, an' you, pards, needn't hev no nightmares a-fearin' ther red creepers will clutch your wizen."

Tomahawk's revelation produced a profound impression.

The big chief of desperadoes did not wait for any expressions of opinion, however, but proceeded:

"Thar ain't one ov ther pards what hez been choked, ez you may hev observed, exceptin' ov Monte. Now Monte he turns on ther crowd an' sw'ars ter squeal some of ther secrets ter the Thunderbolts, whereat his windpipe is duly closed. I may byer remark thet the'r Thunderbolt crowd ain't unlikely ter look in hyer at any time nowadays, considerin' ov ther fact thet this Prince Philip is spotted fer a spy; an' I hyer informs you thet Eagle Jerry's corpus wuz a Thunderbolter what starts ter lasso this camp in disguise. Ther red pards, what knows ever' pair o' eyes in ther band, spotted 'im, an' durin' ther big thunderstorm, while Jerry reposes alongside a rock in ther Vulture Range, they reaches fer his gullet and they finds it. Those Injuns watch ther stage close an' sharp, an' all thet Tucson trail, an' whenever a foe comes along be don't arrive hyer in fightin' condition, none whatever. Now I takes it ever' man hyer is a true pard, fer thar's sartain none hyer what ain't proved, some time or other, thet he's sound an' squar'; wherefore, we all welcomes these red pards an' takes 'em inter fellowship, an' bid 'em God-speed in a removin' ov our foes. Likewise, we joins hands ter meet the'r Thunderbolts, an' all comers what don't live up with our principals an' sech. Am I talkin' through my face, pards?"

"Right!" exclaimed the crowd in unanimous reply.

"We're in the same boat with you, Tomahawk, and we backs you fer our pile."

"Do yer swear to thet?"

Every right hand was raised.

That uncouth assemblage was Tomahawk's, body and soul. Twenty men who would fight for him, lie for him, die for him.

"I makes the move," said the king-pin of the desperadoes, presently, "thet we refrains from any undue intimacy with Prince Philip ter-day, an' allow Long Knife an' Tiger Face ter settle scores with him ter-night. Seein' ez how this

youthlet hez sech a durn sight o' friends in Butte, thar might be some row over his takin' off by one ov us, wherefore ther red pards does ther job slick an' fine, accordin' ter instructions. It's more'n likely he done up Snake Foot, an' when I makes this known to 'em they relishes his demise extremely. Now I adds an invitation ter this discourse, which nary man goes back on, er I misses my guess. Thar's ter be a weddin' at this place at twelve o'clock ter-night, and I asks every man hyer ter show up—dry."

This produced another sensation.

Before any questions could be asked, however, attention was diverted to the wounded Tiny Pete.

He had grown deathly white, and was sinking in his chair.

Doc Dimity rushed to him and held a brandy bottle to his lips.

The effort was vain; Tiny Pete had cashed his last chip.

A sudden hemorrhage, produced by the exertion of leaving his bed, took the sight from his eyes and the breath from his lips.

True to his rough nature, he was dying with his boots on.

In a moment it was over. His last word was a curse for Prince Philip.

It was echoed by savage oaths for speedy vengeance from a score of bearded lips.

CHAPTER XI.

EAGLE JERRY IN THE TOILS.

A THUNDERBOLT spy! That was enough to make Prince Philip hated like poison by twenty toughs in Triple Butte.

The Thunderbolt Rangers were the most dreaded band of Regulators the halter's own of Arizona had ever dealt with.

They had never descended on Triple Butte, but there was reason to expect them at any time.

Tomahawk and his minions never ceased to watch for them or their emissaries. It was to guard against them chiefly that the Dogtown desperado had sent the Red Thugs to cultivate their friendship, and then had stationed them at Ranch Robin to watch the Tucson trail, by which an approach to the camp would likely be made.

The suspicion held by Tomahawk, Max and others that the young new-comer to Triple Butte was a spy of the Regulators, had been confirmed by Tiny Pete with his dying breath.

Therefore there was no longer any room for doubt.

Tiny had, it was known, been somewhat intimate with the gold speculator, and must have spoken by the card. Moreover, Tiny was shrewd, and had a faculty of ingratiating himself into a man's confidence, either for an honest purpose or a sinister one.

It was evident that he had succeeded in worming the truth from Prince Philip.

They were not aware that he had gone to Prince Philip with protestations of friendship, and had promised—for a consideration—to inform on them, and had thus not only discovered the youth's mission to Triple Butte, or at least a part of it, but had gained such knowledge, as he thought, of Philip's surroundings and habits as would enable him to rob him intelligently. They did not know that Tiny's death had resulted from his attempt to force an entrance to the boy's cabin for purposes of robbery, and that therefore his blood was on his own head. But had they known, it would have made no difference. Prince Philip was a common enemy, and whether he was directly or indirectly responsible for their pard's death, the case called for his summary disposal just the same.

When Prince Philip heard of Tiny's death he remembered the widow's warning, and that three loads of the Winchester in his cabin had been fired while he was absent at Ranch Robin, and he understood. His confidence in the treacherous rough had been sadly misplaced. Needless to add, Tiny's fate caused him no tears. He had little use for him now, anyhow; he had found out what he wanted to know from other and more reliable sources.

The end of day was near when Philip walked into the Red Light in search of Vasquez.

The *vaquero* had been missing all day, and in consequence he was suspected of treachery. Furthermore, who but Vasquez could have told Tomahawk of the presence of Phosa at the widow's?

On the other hand, perhaps Vasquez was held a captive somewhere, and had been forced into a confession of the secret he was paid to guard.

Philip wished to satisfy himself on the point.

If Vasquez was not a traitor, his services were desired as guard of the widow's cabin and its occupants.

He had hunted the Mexican high and low, and finally he carried his quest to the Red Light.

Before the entrance to the place stood a score of men who eyed him with deep scowls as he passed them.

They were Tomahawk and his pards who, after burying Tiny Pete and absorbing a quantity of Mex's liquor, were awaiting the arrival of Eagle Jerry's "hearse."

Philip did not know that every tough there was thirsting for his blood, else he might have exercised more caution.

He did know, however, that his doom had been pronounced by Tomahawk, but he knew at the same time, that the big desperado would not attack him openly in broad daylight. That was not Tomahawk's way of doing such things.

The majority of Triple Butte's citizens were honest and well-to-do, and these men were all his friends. His big enemy would not precipitate inevitable trouble on himself by forcing a collision when they were about, as they were at this time of the day.

The toughs of the camp could not but admire the young speculator's nerve as he sauntered past them without so much as a glance of apprehension in return for their scowls.

Not a man of them made a hostile movement. They remembered the agreement at the Hawk's Nest, that he was to be left to the Red Thugs.

This was best, for they would escape all personal responsibility and danger. The vengeance of the Thunderbolts was something not to be coveted and courted.

In was in just such instances as this that the savage stranglers were particularly useful.

They were silent and they were sure, and there was a mystery about their deeds that baffled all theory and investigation.

Mex's place was rapidly filling with loiterers, who were always on hand to greet Uncle Jerry's return from his bi-weekly trip to Tucson with the mails and passengers—when there were any.

Prince Philip leaned over the bar and questioned Mex.

"Has there been one of your countrymen, named Vasquez, here to-day?"

"No," was the surly response.

"Do you happen to know him? Have you seen him anywhere?"

"No."

"A man down the street told me that there was a strange Mexican here whom you had been plying with liquor all day. Who was that?"

"There's been no sech human hyer," said the yellow tough.

Philip turned away.

As he approached the door he heard a man on the outside say:

"How about that weddin', Tommy? Who in thunder's goin' ter git married?"

He did not catch the reply.

"At midnight, eh?" went on the coarse voice. "Who's ther bride? Is ther sermon-sharp engaged? Say, this ain't no fake, is it?"

Again Tomahawk's reply was not distinguished, but it produced a loud laugh.

"All right, I'll wait an' see, an' I'll be at the Nest on time, *dry*," the first speaker continued. "Thar's nothin' quite so joyous ez a weddin' jamboree. Say, Tommy, you ain't a-goin' ter git married, shore enough?"

"Thar ain't nawthin' in this camp fer a decent man ter tie to," said another tough. "Exceptin' ov ther widdy, ther critters hyerabouts ain't wu'th ther powder it'd take ter blow 'em up. I can't make out what this pard Tomahawk is up to."

Prince Philip heard no more. At this moment a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he was drawn to one side by a man who had a scarred face and was beardless, and who had the reputation of being a reformed criminal from an Eastern city.

"It's jest occurred again ter a number ov us that Eagle Jerry must know somethin' about ther red stranglers," said the man, in low tones, "an' we proposes takin' him in hand when he rides in byer to-night. This camp don't digest its vittals right sence these mocc-a-ined destroyers come around. What do you think ov ther idea, Philip?"

"I don't think Jerry knows anything about the Thugs, Blanco," replied the youth. "I questioned him closely myself."

"Waal, we don't see ez how he starts from Tucson with a live passenger and brings up hyer with a dead one, an' another man at that, an'

thet same stiff hev ther print ov fingers in his throat, with Jerry a-knownin' nothin' ov ther why and wherefor thereof. We don't swaller that story noways, an' we makes him shell out ther facts er we stretches his durn neck. Thar's some ov us law-abidin' citizens hyer who one time er other broke ther ten commandments, back in ther States, an' galoots what sneak around at night fingerin' fer vengeance gives us ther creeps, an' we ain't a-hankerin' fer it a durn bit. We're tryin' ter keep this camp respectable as possible, considerin' ther presence ov ther crowd outside, an' we're tired ov bein' preyed on by murderers in moccasins. Are you with us, Philip?"

"Of course. Only I don't think Jerry knows anything. His story was straight."

There was a commotion outside. The stage was coming.

The crowd in the Red Light joined the crowd outside. Blanco and Prince Philip got separated, and the youth saw his late companion join a group of ten or a dozen who seemed inclined to keep to themselves.

Eagle Jerry was promptly on time. That fact could have been discerned by the little Jehu's lordly attitude on the box as he rolled up in front of Mex's.

"Hyer we are, squar' on time!" he exclaimed. "Eagle Jerry is ther man what does it! Ever since I wuz held up by Cap'n Eagle's men I hez been—By hookey! ef ther widdy bain't broke 'er record fer once! She's not hyer!"

There was not a passenger. There was no mail. Never since the time Jerry was held up by Captain Eagle's men, a circumstance which he considered so remarkable an honor that he was forever boasting of it, and had been christened Eagle Jerry in consequence, bad the coincidence of neither mail nor passenger occurred.

The crowd quickly dispersed.

Jerry was taking a drink at Mex's bar when Blanco touched him on the arm and said:

"You're wanted outside!"

The little Jehu followed him out without a word.

When twenty paces beyond the door he was surrounded by a dozen men, who looked serious.

"We wants ther truth about ther corpus with creases in his throat," he was informed. "We're on ther trail ov ther Red Thugs. You know somethin', Eagle Jerry, an' by Tophet, yer must tell it!"

Jerry protested his ignorance, but he was not believed.

Blanco and his pards were aroused. The fact that Eagle Jerry affiliated with Tomahawk and his crowd was against him, in the first place, and in the second place circumstantial evidence that he knew more than he told was shown.

The little Jehu found himself in a bad box. True, he was on friendly terms with the "Red Light gang," but he was not one of them. He knew none of their secrets and he participated in none of their evil-doings. He could not count on them to defend him, and now that the rival element of the camp had turned against him he was surely in a hole.

It seemed that if he got out of the scrape he should have to do so utterly unaided; and he had only his word to offer as defense, while as a fighter the little driver was nothing much to speak of.

He expostulated. He swore to the truth of his statements. He begged to be given time to substantiate his story.

Blanco and his pards were grim and determined.

By the time the impromptu trial was at an end, the jury of a dozen had increased to twenty-five. As the numbers increased, so did the excitement.

With the perversity of border justice, the more he affirmed his innocence the more he was distrusted.

"We stretches you up a bit, an' see ef that fetches the truth!" was the stern verdict

CHAPTER XII.

A VISITOR IN DISGUISE.

TOMAHAWK and his pards gathered about Mex's bar, discussed the action of the crowd outside with furtive smiles and knowing looks.

"Eagle Jerry's in fer it!" said Tomahawk. "Thet pack o' durn fools will make his iron heart go ki-yi in a way be will despise, an' I don't miss this guess, none whatever."

Jerry got little sympathy, and no one thought of lending him a hand. Indeed, Tomahawk had little interest in the case, apparently, for presently he left the Red Light, and twenty minutes later rode away from camp toward the south.

Prince Philip did not participate in the movement against the Jehu, but he kept his eye on the "jury" from a distance.

He did not care to interfere unless it was absolutely necessary in order to save Eagle Jerry's life. He should have to back up the action with explanations, which he was not yet ready to make, if avoidable.

He saw Tomahawk ride away, and he saw Blanco and his pards suddenly seize Eagle Jerry and force him toward a tree from a limb of which a rope already dangled.

The youth had scarcely expected this. He realized now that Triple Butte had all at once grown terribly in earnest in the effort to unearth the mystery of the midnight crimes.

The inaction of the Tomahawk crowd was significant to Prince Philip. It was plain that they knew the secret of the moccasin-prints and the blue finger-marks, and realized the farce of taking measures against the Red Thugs.

Eagle Jerry was certainly in need of assistance. The noose was already about his neck. The little Jehu's face was whiter even than it was on that memorable occasion when Captain Eagle and his band covered him with their deadly rifles.

"Fer ther last time, Jerry," said Blanco, "will yer confess ther truth?"

"So help me God, I don't know anything ter confess!" was the reply.

Some one suddenly pushed Blanco aside and grasped the rope that was tightening above Jerry's head.

A murmur ran through the crowd.

"The widdy!"

Mrs. Jake's eyes were flashing with excitement and anger.

"This outrage hez gone fur enough, Dave Blanco?" she cried. "This crowd ought to be ashamed ov itself! I'd stake my life Eagle Jerry don't know any more about the Red Thugs than you do, an' I'm not goin' to stand by an' see him strung up, though I be a peaceful woman!"

This settled it. Dave Blanco and some others there were sweet on the widow, and they didn't care to cross her.

Prince Philip had pushed in at the widow's heels, meaning to defend Eagle Jerry if necessary.

"She's right," he said to the suddenly quiet crowd. "Eagle Jerry knows nothing, and there is no use, nor is it right, to carry this thing any further. If you men will only hold a little while you'll find out all you want to know."

Eagle Jerry drew a long breath of relief as the widow herself removed the rope from his neck and unbound his hands.

"The widdy is always on hand," he said, and somehow Mrs. Jake construed the words into a compliment, for she looked pleased.

The wind had all been taken out of the sails of the crowd, and they fell back and had nothing more to say.

Prince Philip talked in an undertone to Dave Blanco for a few moments, and then walked away. The widow and Eagle Jerry had already gone off together, unmolested.

The Thunderbolt spy reached the widow's cabin almost by the time they did, for they had walked slowly.

Philip had a word with Jerry in private, and when the latter went away he turned to say for the second time:

"You kin count on me, Philip. Anything you an' the widdy wants frum Eagle Jerry yer hez, by hokey!"

He kept his word. Two hours after darkness had fallen over Triple Butte Eagle Jerry returned to Mrs. Jake's cabin, where Philip had remained.

"The Mexican has not shown up yet," said the youth.

"Waal, I'm ready fer business," said Jerry. "I'll keep my gun oiled an' primed, an' ther fu'st galoot what makes a commotion hyer will git locoed so durn quick it'll curl his hair with surprise. Philip," he added, "there was a stranger a-knockin' at your door, ez I come by. An' durn me, ef I wouldn't sw'ar it wuz ther same identical galoot what I lost'twixt hyer an' Tucson. He sez ter me, 'Whar's Prince Philip? Ef ye see bim tell 'im ter come hyer.' 'How is this?' I sez—'What in ther dooce become ov you?' 'Thet,' he sez, 'thet'll be explained in due time. Ef you see Prince Philip, tell 'im I want 'im.'"

Philip looked his astonishment.

He waited for no questions, but prepared to depart at once.

He went into a second room where Phosa and the padre were sitting.

"Vasquez is doubtless treacherous," he said;

"if he comes while I am gone do not trust him."

"I fear him," said the girl. "He tried to make love to me, and when I laughed in his face he muttered a curse. He may mean me harm."

"I will look out for him. I will be back before long. While I am gone, you will have a safe guard. I hope we may leave Triple Butte very soon. Captain Thunderbolt may come at any time. Then we shall get beyond danger."

"Are we in much danger then?" asked the priest.

"Yes, and no," answered Philip, evasively, and then he kissed Phosa and went out, only pausing for a parting injunction to Eagle Jerry, whose presence seemed to make the widow unusually happy.

The gold spy went swiftly through the town toward his own cabin.

The moon was up, and the rocky trails of the camp were flooded with light.

The town was peculiarly quiet.

On the youth's face was a look of mystification.

"Can it be that I was mistaken about Theo's case?" he said to himself. "Impossible! And did I not see his disguise at Ranch Robin?"

He approached his cabin with the greatest caution.

Suddenly he paused and drew back in the shadows of a log hut which he was passing at the moment of alarm.

Two tall, unmistakable figures were skulking through the moonlight ahead of him.

The shadow of Triple Butte involuntarily uttered an exclamation as he recognized them.

"The Red Thugs are back again!"

His teeth closed firmly, and his hand caressed the handle of a weapon in his belt.

"If Captain Thunderbolt would only come tonight!" he said, under his breath.

Only for an instant were the silent strangers from the South visible.

They crossed the spy's trail at right angles, and were lost among the shadows of the three buttes.

Presently the youth stole forward again.

He was burning to get a glimpse of the man in Theo's disguise, whom Eagle Jerry had said was waiting for him.

As he neared his cabin he looked for the visitor in vain.

No soul was in sight.

Satisfied that the man had departed, he went forward and entered the shanty.

He struck a light, and the next moment there was a knock at the front door.

He opened it, and the man described by the Jehu entered, with a nod of salutation.

He was large of stature, with a full brown beard and long hair, and he wore a handsome jacket of navy blue.

It was Theo's disguise, sure enough, or its exact counterpart.

A peculiar glance leaped into Prince Philip's eyes as he rapidly surveyed his visitor from head to heel, and his muscles seemed to contract as though he were preparing for a sudden movement.

"I've been waiting fer you, Prince Philip. I've got a bag ov gold-dust what I wants ter exchange for bills, an' I'm told that's your business."

A covert smile wreathed Philip's lips.

"Aren't you a stranger in camp?" he said.

The visitor took a seat and leaned forward on the table on which the lamp sat, and which separated him from the youth.

He lowered his voice, as though afraid of being overheard, and said, with a confidential air:

"I'm from ther Cap."

"Cap who?" queried Prince Philip.

"Cap Thunderbolt!"

The smile on the youth's lips hardened a trifle.

"Well, what did Cap'n Thunderbolt send you here for?"

"Why, to assist you, ov course. That's plenty ov work fer both ov us hyer."

The smile faded from Prince Philip's face, and his brow grew dark.

All at once the man "from Captain Thunderbolt" found himself looking into the barrel of a glistening six shooter. And over it flashed the sharp utterance:

"I don't know what your object is in coming here, Tomahawk, and you needn't waste any words explaining! This game don't go; see?

I've seen that disguise before, and it don't fool me for a moment! I saw you ride away to the south, and I presume you found this disguise at Ranch Robin. You've made a mistake, Tomahawk!"

Prince Philip's visitor did not move. He did not speak. He only stared fixedly at the little torpedo with glittering eyes.

"You were a fool to think you could deceive me, Tomahawk," the youth went on. "Why, I should know you among a thousand in any disguise! You can't hope to find me out by any such method as this. Do you know your danger? I have a notion to send a bullet through your head!"

Tomahawk had the reputation of being quick, and he sustained it well at this moment.

With one sweep of the arm that rested on the table by the lamp he extinguished the flame, and sprung swiftly and noiselessly from his chair.

There was a flash and report, but Prince Philip's bullet went wide of the mark.

The next instant the Thunderbolt spy was pounced upon and crushed to the floor.

His terrible assailant seemed to have the strength of an enraged lion.

He was resisted desperately, but the big desperado was invincible with the advantage he had gained.

Prince Philip was helpless in that clutch of steel.

Presently he lay motionless.

CHAPTER XIII.

HAND-TO-HAND.

TOMAHAWK went to the door and looked out into the moonlight.

He appeared to be debating something in his mind.

A shadow that flitted across the trail a hundred paces away, in the direction of the Hawk's Nest, caught his eye and inspired him to action.

He strode swiftly up the street as if to intercept the prowler whose shadow he had seen and recognized.

The Dogtown desperado seemed eager to overtake this individual.

When he arrived at the spot where the shadow had fallen he paused and looked keenly about.

There was no one in view.

He noted the position of the moon in the heavens, and reflected that to cast the long shadow he had observed it was necessary to occupy a certain relative position; thus locating the object of his quest, he turned to the left and passed between two dark and deserted cabins.

Every instant he expected his glance to fall upon the flitting figure he pursued.

The cabins obscured the moonlight, and for a moment he was in somber gloom.

All at once the object of pursuit made his presence known and felt in the most startling manner.

From a dark corner he leaped upon Tomahawk like a panther upon its prey!

The attack was as unexpected as it was terrible.

Tomahawk, taken by surprise and consequently at a disadvantage, was temporarily powerless.

The force with which he was struck hurled him backward against the logs of the cabin at his right.

At his throat a pair of brawze hands—the hands of an Indian—creased into his flesh and stopped his breath!

Tomahawk had forgotten that he was disguised.

He did not know that when he rode away from Ranch Robin two hours before, leaving the house a burning ruin, and wearing the disguise that he had found within, he had been followed with deadly purpose by the two Apaches who, returning from the Tucson trail, where they had been on the lookout for Thunderbolt foes, were stirred to righteous anger by finding their home in flames.

They had not recognized their master, and now, when he walked almost into the very arms of one of them, he was still not known.

The Indian was bent on avenging the destruction of Ranch Robin, with no suspicion of the real identity of the big vandal.

There was savage satisfaction in his eyes as his swarth hands met about the neck of his victim.

Tomahawk gasped and struggled. He tried to speak, to make himself known, to utter the name "Tiger Face." The effort was vain. That awful clutch upon his trachea effectually prevented so much as a whisper from his lips.

What! Strangled by the red dog whose body and soul he owned! Never!

He writhed like a monster, and strove to shake off his ferocious adversary, but the fingers at his throat only tightened.

The body of the scarlet Thug was pressed so

closely against his own, crushing him against the logs behind, that he could do little by way of defense.

He felt himself growing rapidly weaker. His vision was blurred, and his head seemed ready to burst.

The desperado was about to meet the hideous fate that he had dealt out to so many others. Was it not the very justice he deserved?

He made one last desperate effort. The powerful will of the man would not be conquered until his heart had actually ceased to beat.

By a superhuman endeavor he managed to grasp the handle of a knife in the Indian's belt. His fingers closed around it as a drowning man grasps at a straw.

He drew it forth and with the energy of despair, plunged it repeatedly into the side and back of his red assailant.

The horrible grip upon his throat began to loosen.

He was to triumph after all!

His strength came back to him. His eyes were clear again.

The hands of the assassin fell away, and their owner reeled back with his life-blood spurting from his side.

Once more the blade descended, and sunk to the hilt in the Apache's heart.

Tiger Face would never again haunt the mountain trails in search of Tomahawk's foes.

His keenness of vision, of which his master had boasted, had failed him for once, and he had precipitated his own doom by attacking the man who, above all others, he would have defended with all the savage enthusiasm of his nature.

The man whose slave he was was forced to deal him death in self-defense.

With a cry, the Indian fell to the ground, and Tomahawk staggered out into the moonlight, mopping the cold perspiration from his face.

"Ther red fool!" he grated, when he had recovered himself. "This is a purty howdedo, when a man hez ter kill his own pard. Great Tartarus! That's only only one ov ther reds left!"

He divested himself of the disguise which had so nearly proven fatal, and cast jacket, wig and beard into the shadows.

"I'll go back and finish ther spy!" he uttered with sudden resolve. "I'll finish him an' I finds his little private bonanza at ther same time. I falls sole heir to what gold I finds! Toon fer the gal!"

He went back over the ground that he had traversed in pursuit of the shadow, and re-entered Prince Philip's cabin.

Some one seemed to be moving in the darkness.

He heard the click of a weapon, and with a swift and silent movement he changed his position, in anticipation of a shot.

Had the youth recovered consciousness? Apparently.

The big desperado was surprised at this. He did not think he had killed his young foe, but he did believe that he had seriously disabled him, and that he would not be capable of defending himself for at least an hour to come.

But he must have been mistaken.

Evidently there had been a quick recovery, and now Prince Philip was watching his opportunity to perforate him with lead in retaliation for his blows.

Tomahawk was cautious, lest his movements should betray his position, and thus call forth a shot.

Equally cautious was the personage whose weapon had clicked.

There was utter silence in the cabin.

Tomahawk had drawn a twelve-inch bowie from his boot, and waited with suppressed breath for an opportunity to spring upon the foe even as Tiger Face had sprung upon him.

All the bad blood of his evil nature was up now.

The killing of his red pard had given him a thirst for crime, and he had the ferocity of a beast that fattens on blood.

Once his hands were upon his youthful enemy again, there should be no half-way work in the matter of his disposal.

The room was absolutely dark. There was but one window in the cabin, and that, like the door, was on the side opposite the moon.

Still it was not impossible for a man who had owl eyes to discern the faint outline of a statu-esque figure.

All at once there was a flash and a deafening report, and a bullet creased along Tomahawk's cheek.

At one great bound the desperado cleared the intervening space between himself and his

enemy, and the bodies of the two came in contact.

The contest was to be a deadly hand-to-hand affair.

There was a mutual clutching at throats, a savage tussle for the advantage of hold.

Not a word was spoken. Words were superfluous under such circumstances.

Death to the Joe, was the one thought uppermost, and it required no discussion.

Tomahawk was as resistless as an avalanche.

This time the advantage was upon his side, and he made the most of it.

Down came the cruel blade, and was buried to the hilt in the breast of his adversary!

The latter reeled backward with a groan; but Tomahawk did not release his hold or relax his efforts.

Again the knife descended—and then again.

That satisfied the mountain vampire.

That appeased his appetite for the nonce.

And well it might, for his terrible triumph was quite complete.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH TO TRAITORS.

At the Hawk's Nest nearly a score of the roughest element that dominated Triple Butte had assembled in anticipation of a mysterious wedding.

Tomahawk was to be married, and they were there to do him honor and drink at his expense; but whom was he to wed?

That was a question that mystified all, with the exception of Apache Abe and possibly one or two others.

The big bridegroom had reserved the particulars of the affair in order to give his beloved henchman a surprise.

Would there not be genuine astonishment when he led in the fair and blushing Phosa, the most beautiful girl that Triple Butte had ever seen, accompanied by a real priest to make the union valid?

What a cheer there would be when he proposed her health as the Queen of Triple Butte!

The crowd was on hand early, for the games at the Red Light had for once lost their interest, and Mex's bar had no seductions, for were they not pledged to attend the important ceremony *dry*, in order that their happy host might have the pleasure of filling them up?

The wedding was the principal theme of discussion, and many and varied were the speculations regarding it.

Tomahawk was conspicuous by his absence, and likewise were Mexican Jack and Mozeek.

Tomahawk came in presently, however.

There were dark blotches on the sleeve of his red shirt, and there was a bloody crease on his cheek, which suggested that he had recently been in close quarters.

His eyes were blazing, and he had the air of a man who is baffled.

"What's wrong, Tommy?" was a general query.

Tomahawk refused to explain.

"All the'll come later," he replied. "I'm none whatever in ther mood now."

"Whar's ther bride?"

"Don't you fellers git in sech a durn rush. Thar ain't no wherefore fer eny turrible baste, as I sees. You ain't fer thinkin' I'm goin' ter be married in a bloody shirt, are yer? I'm hyer ter rig up now, an' then I'm goin' after ther bride an' ther Bible sharp. Whar's Mex?"

"He ain't showed up yet," replied Apache Abe, who, as best man, was resplendent in a clean shirt, corduroy trowsers, and oiled boots. "We're all hyer exceptin' ov him and Mozeek."

"I guess Mozeek won't be hyer," said the big desperado, and disappeared in an inner room to make his wedding "twilight," as his pards expressed it.

When he emerged he wore a starched shirt with a garish silk tie, and, with unprecedented decorum, his trowsers were not tucked into the tops of his boots. A long strip of court-plaster covered the wound on his cheek.

"Hyer goes fer ther purtiest bride ever in ther territory!" he declared, pompously. "Abe, set 'em up to ther boys while ye'r waitin'."

Then he went out, and strode away in the direction of the widow's.

The devil of anticipated victory was now dancing in his eyes.

There was the confidence of the conqueror in his stride.

What could balk his purpose now?

And what mattered it whether the bride was willing or not? That was of no moment whatever, and not worth considering.

What possible resistance, either by herself or any casual champion, could withstand his determined effort to possess her.

He would promptly reward any outside interference with death.

He did not propose that his wedding guests should be disappointed, to say nothing of his own feelings in the matter.

There was a light in the widow's cabin, and the door stood wide open.

As he approached he thought he heard a woman crying.

The next moment he was sure of it.

As he stepped in to the door he beheld the widow bending over the prostrate body of Eagle Jerry, on whose breast were blood-stains made by a bullet.

The widow was bandaging the wound, excited and grief-stricken.

"What's this mean?" Tomahawk demanded.

"Whar's ther gal?"

"Gone!" cried the woman.

The desperado uttered an oath.

"Gone?" he exclaimed; "gone whar? Who's been a-doin' ov Eagle Jerry?"

"Mexican Jack an' that illain Vasquez!"

"Did they take ther gal?"

"Yes!"

Tomahawk's teeth snapped, and he ground out another oath in tempestuous fury.

"How long ago does this occur?"

"Only a few minutes. They comes in like raiders, an' are gone in no time, a-carryin' ov that dear little girl with her handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, an' me a-lyin' over there with a lick on the head. An' here's poor Jerry, and in that other room is the holy father, knocked all unconscious an' maybe dyin'!"

"Which way did they go, widdys?" questioned Tomahawk.

Mrs. Jake did not know, but she thought they went toward the north.

Tomahawk waited for no more.

Like an aroused tiger he hurried from the cabin and on toward the center of the camp.

He seemed to know where to find the men who had abducted his bride.

"This means that Mex an' his pal are a-goin' ter shake ther camp," he uttered, under his breath. "Therefore they lays up at ther Red Light, whar I notices that's no lights ter-night, ter prepare somewhat fer travel. North? Tartarus, no! They makes a sneakin', roundabout course fer ther Red Light, an' then they str'res south fer ther durn Greaser kentry they hails from. I know these durn Mexicans. By Tophet! Won't I pay Mex for this treachery!"

All at once he was joined by an individual whose skin was of bronze, and who wore drooping eagle-plumes in his coarse, stiff hair.

"Long Knife—jest ther pard I wants ter see!" exclaimed Tomahawk. "Whar you been all this time?"

"Camp trails," said the Indian, laconically.

"What success?"

"None. No find boy. No find man who burn Ranch Robin. No find man who kill Snake Foot. No find man who kill Tiger Face!"

Tomahawk expressed the greatest surprise at this speech.

"What!" he cried, "Ranch Robin burned Tiger Face dead?"

The Indian nodded assent.

"Who in Tartarus could hav done this?"

"Me find," was the stoic's reply. "Me keep the trail forever, but me find. The Indian's fingers are strong!"

Tomahawk had nothing to say for a moment. Then he mentioned the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"Did you see anything of two Greasers an' a gal? I wants 'em durn bad!"

"Long Knife see," was the answer. "They go in Red Light, back way. Mex carry gal. Just now go in Red Light."

"I thought so," said Tomahawk, with an oath of satisfaction. "Come with me, Long Knife, and ther fu'st Greaser yer sees squeeze his throat fer keeps! Mex hez a traitor-pard hyer frum Greaserland, an' they've stole a gal what belongs ter me."

Tomahawk and his Indian pard approached the Red Light side by side, with eyes and ears on the alert for the traitors they pursued.

Tomahawk was in too great a rage to exercise much caution, but when, on nearing the entrance of the apparently deserted resort, they beheld a man on guard at the door, and holding a pair of horses by the bridle-reins, as though equipped for an immediate journey, he restrained himself and came to a halt in the shadows.

"Mex is inside, a-cleanin' out ther cash drawer," was the desperado's quick conclusion.

"I'll surprise him, Injun, but first you sneak up an' clap yer fingers on his pard thar, an' don't make no noise ter disturb ther yell'er gopher inside."

There was a grunted response, and the last of the Thugs darted forward with a tread as light as falling dew.

He kept in the shadow, and Vasquez the betrayer had no warning of the danger that menaced him.

There was a moment of utter silence, broken by the champing of the waiting steeds.

Then two hands of bronze whose grip was like that of a steel vise closed around the throat of the startled Mexican, and before he could realize his jeopardy he was in the horrors of strangulation.

He could utter no sound; he was like an infant in the coils of a cobra.

His last futile struggle was but the matter of seconds.

The red strangler was a master of assassination.

Presently the Mexican, limp and lifeless, was cast backward to the ground with a grunt of satisfaction from his slayer. The yellow traitor had paid the price of his treachery.

Already Tomahawk was at the door. He opened it softly, and pushed forward with a revolver in his right hand.

The room in which he found himself was dark, but in an inner room, the door of which stood slightly ajar, a light dimly barned.

He could see Mexican Jack busying himself with preparations for quick departure from the Red Light and Triple Butte.

His captive, unconscious, lay on the floor.

Tomahawk's entrance was heard, despite his precaution.

"I'm ready now in a minit, Vasquez," said Mex, without turning his head. "Keep a sharp eye out, an' hev ther hosses ready. We'll quit ther heifer crowd of this Dogtown camp fer good an' all, an' ther Chihuahua prize goes along!"

"Thet's a durn lie!" was the loud retort, and Tomahawk flung wide the intervening door.

Mex wheeled, only to stare into the deadliest weapon in Arizona.

"Thar never wuz a yellow snake what told a bigger lie!" Tomahawk went on, fiercely. "You've made ther mistake ov yer life, Mex! Thar's death ter thieves in Triple Butte!"

Then there was a sudden pressure of the trigger, and the yellow tough tumbled headlong with a bullet in his brain!

Tomahawk caught up the girl with an exclamation of triumph.

"Now fer ther weddin'!" he cried.

As he started out, he was struck by a new idea and he turned back and upset the burning lamp upon the floor.

It was a vicious act—the insatiable revenge of a malevolent demon.

The burning oil ran along the floor, spreading the flames in every direction.

The Red Light was doomed to demonstrate the appropriateness of its name.

Long Knife, the Thug, was waiting on the outside.

CHAPTER XV.

NIGHT RIDERS FROM VALDEZ VALLEY.

A YOUTH who had just recovered his senses sat up on a cot in a little log hut which crouched at the foot of the three buttes that gave the camp its name.

A thin-faced man whose hair was white and whose shoulders were bent with the weight of years stood near him, viewing his recovery with apparent pleasure.

"How came I here, Old Likely?" asked the youth in a dazed way.

"I carried you," replied the old man proudly. "I was passing your cabin, strolling in the moonlight, when I heard a shot within and a struggle. I thought my young friend must be in danger, and I slipped up softly to the side of the cabin and listened. Presently the stranger who had choked and struck you came out, and I went in and found you lying on the floor. I thought you were dead at first; then I found your heart was beating, and I brought you here. You are well now, Prince Philip?"

Prince Philip got upon his feet.

"Yes," he answered, "I owe you a deep debt of gratitude, Old Likely. I shall never forget this. You must be very strong to carry me so far."

"I am strong," said the old man—"much stronger than you would think. And I have felt unusually well all this day."

"How long is it since you found me?"

"Half an hour—or not much more."

"Good!" cried Philip. "I must go now. I have much to do. I have been wishing to come to see you but could not. I will come again. I want you to guard your secrets well, Old Likely. The time is near at hand when it will not be necessary—when you may be called upon to tell the world all you know, but now there is only safety in silence. I shall not forget all that you have done for me. Good-by."

"Good-by, Philip," said the old man, and the door closed between him and the youth whose life he had saved.

Prince Philip went straight to his own cabin. He walked burriedly, and his mind seemed busy with plans.

"I wish Captain Thunderbolt would come to-night!" he said under his breath more than once.

"I wonder what Tomahawk had done here," he muttered as he neared the door. "What a tempest he is! I don't want to get in his clutch again. I shall shoot to kill next time, though I really do not wish to settle accounts with him until Captain Thunderbolt comes. When he fell upon me there in the dark I thought surely my time had arrived. Ugh! how terrible it was! If he went away, as Old Likely said, he must have—I wonder where the Red Thugs are? I thought I was to be put out of the way by them. I suppose Tomahawk wished to make sure that I would not interfere with his weddng, so he undertook to dispose of me himself. Well—he nearly succeeded, I must confess! It was his purpose to pump me, too, and find out all about me, but that didn't succeed for a cent!"

He entered his cabin cautiously by the secret entrance in the rear.

All was silent within.

He struck a light, and gazed around.

The sight that met his gaze brought an exclamation from his lips.

Outstretched upon the floor, with a revolver in his bandaged right hand, and three great gashes in his breast, was Mozeek.

Philip was mystified.

Who could have done this?

How had Mozeek come there, in the very place he himself had been only a short time before?

Perhaps the rough had come to rob him, and had been surprised in the act by some one who mistook his identity.

Perhaps Tomahawk had come back and they had fought over the gold that was supposed to be concealed in the cabin.

The room was in confusion, as though it had been searched high and low for hidden treasure.

Philip had the satisfaction of knowing that it had been a fruitless quest.

He did not pause for investigation of the tragedy now. There was more important work for him to do.

He secured some fresh weapons, and turned his back on the cabin and its dead.

Five minutes later the camp shadow was viewing the assembled crowd at the Hawk's Nest through a partially screened window.

Tomahawk was there.

Satisfied of this, Philip hastened away toward the widow's.

He must be on hand to protect Phosa when Tomahawk came for his bride.

He would spoil the contemplated wedding at the Hawk's Nest if it cost him his life.

Suddenly, as he turned the corner of a cabin, he was confronted by a man who wore a wide sombrero and garments of rich velveteen, and who had the shrewd, penetrating eyes of a fox.

For a moment the youth stood astounded, and then he leaped forward and grasped the stranger's hand.

He had the discretion not to utter a name, but when he cried, "I have been praying for you!" the identity of the stranger was not difficult to guess.

Captain Thunderbolt had come!

"I have a way of putting in an appearance at the right moment!" he said, smiling.

He seemed almost as pleased to see the boy as the latter was to see him.

"I received your letter last night," he continued. "It was brought to me in Valdez Valley, from Tucson. Then, although you did not expressly ask it, I came at once."

"And when did you arrive?"

"I have just got here. I left my horse back in the outskirts, and was on the hunt of you."

"And the band—did you bring them?"

"They are not a mile away, back in the shadows of the trail. I took your advice, and avoided the Tucson stage route. We came in from the east."

"That was wise, for eagle-eyed sentinels |

would have warned the toughs of Triple Butte of your approach, in all probability. I have accomplished my mission, Captain Thunderbolt."

"You had success sooner than I expected. I am glad you are ready for me. Tell me all."

The two were sheltered from observant eyes by the dark cabin against which they leaned, and they conversed in low tones, in order not to be overheard.

"I have found the murderer of Major Weldon," said the youth.

"Your father was really murdered, then?"

"Yes, and my mother—my step-mother, too. You have heard of the man often enough—Tomahawk."

Captain Thunderbolt nodded.

"Some other time I will tell you the story of how he played the friend to my father and finally killed him; how he beguiled my mother and little Phosa to Ranch Robin, my father's home, and how two years after, tiring of the helpless woman, he killed her also."

"And the girl?"

"I have found her, too. She is seventeen now, and a beautiful woman. Tomahawk sent her to a convent in Mexico, in charge of a pal, Apache Abe, and there she remained all this time, forgotten, until, in charge of a priest and a Greaser guide she came back to see her mother. She is in Triple Butte now, in the care of a good woman. Tomahawk means to marry her to-night, and the score of toughs who swear by him are yonder at his cabin to attend the ceremony. Of course it shall not be allowed to occur."

"So poor Theo never reached you?"

"No. The Red Thugs penetrated his disguise, and surprised him in the stage, as I explained to you in my letter."

"You quite escaped the Indian stranglers, eh?"

"Yes. As I was a new member of the band they did not know me. But I dare say they are after me now. Tomahawk and I are open enemies, and he must have set his red dogs upon me. I shot one of them at Ranch Robin trail last night."

"Then there are two left?"

"I saw them in camp two hours ago."

The conversation continued for some minutes longer. Prince Philip explained the situation fully, and gave a quick account of the incidents of his adventurous sojourn in the camp. He wound up by urging Captain Thunderbolt to immediate action. The time was ripe for settling the long-standing accounts against Triple Butte's toughs.

The chief of the Rangers heartily agreed. Delays were dangerous just now.

"There are at least ten men here that we want," he said. "We have had our eye on them for a long time, and will make a clean sweep to-night while they are congregated at the Hawk's Nest. If there is any resistance on the part of the pards we'll clean them out, too."

Presently the two walked away toward the east, and brought up at a cabin near the outskirts of the town.

Prince Philip knocked at the door, and the man who answered the summons was Dave Blanco.

"There's going to be a raid on the Tomahawk crowd by the Thunderbolt Rangers to-night," said the youth, when the two men accepted the invitation to enter the shanty. "What will Triple Butte think of such a proceeding?"

The answer was prompt.

"The honest men ov this camp will yell with delight. We've been pestered with this herd ov wolves until we're too sick ter chew good plug, an' ever' decent man rejoices ter see 'em wiped out."

"We know you're true blue, Blanco, and therefore we ask you to explain matters to your friends when the time comes. This movement is for the good of the camp, and we want no opposition from honest men who may labor under the mistaken impression that anything else is intended. You understand? That's all."

Blanco had several questions to ask. They were answered.

At last he said:

"You promised ter hev something ter say about ther chokers in moccasins; that's a matter which ther boys are concerned on."

Philip made good his word, and told how the Red Thugs were emissaries of Tomahawk and his pards, and Captain Thunderbolt gave his word that they would not trouble Triple Butte after that night.

All these things were duly explained to the law-abiding men of the camp the following day

by Blanco, and the mystery of the Secret Stranglers was a mystery no longer.

Shortly after this call upon the leader of Eagle Jerry's assailants, twenty-five mounted men, headed by Captain Thunderbolt, rode into Triple Butte and straight toward the Hawk's Nest.

The terrible Thunderbolt Rangers, so long looked for and dreaded by the enemies of law and order, at last had come on their mission of vengeance.

Triple Butte was to receive a scourging this night such as it had never dreamed of.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAND OF JUSTICE.

As Tomahawk came out of the Red Light with his precious burden, he seemed to think that his troubles were at an end.

"Some people think that's goin' ter be no weddin' in Triple Butte ter-night, but I says yes," he was saying to himself. "I don't see that it matters none that the Bible sport ain't in condition ter be on hand; Apache Abe can do the ceremony jest ez well."

The Indian was bending forward in the shadows at the corner of the cabin, with his gaze fixed on the trail to the East.

All at once he wheeled and leaped to his master's side.

"Thunderbolts come!" he exclaimed.

"Curses!" cried Tomahawk.

The announcement seemed to petrify him with astonishment for a moment.

"Whar, Injin? Whar are they?" he demanded.

The red man pointed to the east, where, through the moonlight, twenty-five dark and silent men were riding down upon the Hawk's Nest.

The desperado debated with himself for an instant, and then he passed his beautiful burden into the hands of Long Knife, and sprung upon one of his horses. Then he bent forward and received his captive again into his arms.

"Come on, pard!" he commanded.

From the windows of the Red Light a tell-tale glow had begun to creep forth, and it was but a matter of a few moments when the entire building would be in flames.

Followed by the Indian with the second horse, Tomahawk, keeping the burning cabin between them and the dread foes from the south, rode away toward the west for a hundred yards, and drew rein in a dark spot in the shelter of a spreading tree.

"Leave yer horse with me, Long Knife," he ordered, "an' make a runnin' sneak fer the Hawk's Nest. Tell the pards the Thunderbolts hez come, an' ter fight like Satan! Then come back to me!"

He had scarcely spoken when he found himself in the shadows alone with his helpless human treasure.

"The Thunderbolts hyer!" he mused under his breath. "By Tophet! thar'll be no weddin' at the Hawk's Nest ter-night arter all. But, thar'll be a hunt fer hearts that'll shake the territory! Waal, let 'em fight it out. Tomahawk will not be thar. Why should I go back an' risk my head when I kin ride away with the most priceless treasure in Arizone? Fight it out, pards! Tomahawk holds the royal flush an' the game is his. He turns his back on Triple Butte this night an' sends yer all ter Kingdom Come! He plays a lone game frum this on. Shoot ter kill, pards, but it won't do no good whatever. The odds are ag'in yer. The weddin' feast is a feast ov blood."

Like a huge red serpent the last of the Thugs crawled swiftly through the cabins of the camp, careful to keep himself concealed from the sharp eyes of the down-swooping foes.

They were approaching slowly, in order not to disturb their covey by the thunder of hoofs.

Long Knife sprang into the Hawk's Nest with a suddenness that created a commotion among the twenty toughs who were waiting for a weddin'.

He stood in the center of the room before Apache Abe, his long arm outstretched toward the east.

"Thunderbolts come!" he uttered, in ringing accents. "Swoop like vultures of the air on pards at Hawk's Nest! Pards fight or die in trap!"

Every man in the room was on his feet and every right hand clutched a six-shooter.

"The Thunderbolts! Whar?" demanded Apache Abe. "Are they hyer now?"

"Yes!" was the Indian's answer. "Fight or die!"

Then he was gone as suddenly as he had come. The toughs of Triple Butte, with oaths and shouts of defiance, examined their weapons to see that every chamber held a leaden ball of death.

A long career of crime made each man certain that he individually was wanted by the Arizona Regulators, and that Justice was at last at his heels clamoring for his life.

They were not cowards, these desperadoes of the mountain mines. Much evil-doing had seared every emotion of fear, and had given them the reckless courage of cougars.

In the absence of Tomahawk, which was loudly deplored, the office of leader fell upon Apache Abe, and he lost no time in stirring his forces to action.

"The Injun was right!" he exclaimed; "we've got ter fight er die. Ther Thunderbolt Rangers wuz never known ter hav mercy on the'rs foes! We've all made oath ter wipe out these pests, time and ag'in in ther past, an' now ther time is hyer to keep thet oath. They come skulkin' in like wolves, an' think ter surprise us hyer, but they'll find us ready ter receive 'em in a way they'll despise."

There was not much time for braggadocio. The night riders were at hand, and deeds, not words, were the order of things.

With their swarth hands heavy with six-shooters, the pards of Triple Butte sprung from the cabin and drew up in battle array before the door.

As they did so, they found themselves face to face with the dreaded Thunderbolt Rangers of Arizona.

The time for the settlement of all old scores was at last come, and a fight was inevitable.

The two parties shot unfriendly looks at each other for a moment, and then came the question:

"Is Tomahawk here?"

"No!" was the short and savage answer.

"We are here to war on individuals, not the flower of Triple Butte," Captain Thunderbolt went on, with some irony. "We want certain men, and if they are quietly surrendered there will be much trouble avoided, and a number of you will not be molested. If there is resistance we will wipe out the entire crowd!"

The answer was unhesitating.

"We are like one man hyer, an' we fights ez sech! When yer tackles one yer tackles all. That means ye'r goin' ter wipe out the crowd, eh? Waal, we'll see about that, Captain Thunderbolt. It's our impression ye've come ter Triple Butte ter die!"

"You refuse, then, to come to terms?"

"Refuse? Not only that, we oper ther ball!"

There was a sudden flashing of weapons, and the toughs of the camp were pouring bullets into the ranks of their foes with deadly accuracy of aim!

Almost instantly the volley was returned, and then Triple Butte became the scene of such a battle as the mountains of the Territory had never rung with before.

It rained lead, and men tumbled right and left, either dead or desperately wounded.

With oaths on their lips, the toughs of the camp went down before the Rangers' bullets like wheat before the scythe.

Mercy was not abroad in Arizona that night. It was death to the last man who fought the agents of justice—instant, pitiless death, the extermination of each and every one of the "varmints" who had so long infested the region and made Triple Butte a nest of infamy.

The battle was of short duration. The Thunderbolt Rangers were more deadly than a violent pestilence, and their assault could not be long withstood.

And when the smoke of the affray cleared away, there in the moonlight lay Apache Abe, Doc Dimity, the Pirate and all the rest, called to their long account at last.

Justice fluttered her wings in mighty triumph that night in the Arizonian mountains.

Many of the Thunderbolt Rangers had gone down, too, never to rise again. But, on the whole, they were victorious, and that was enough.

While this battle raged Prince Philip was not idle.

As the Thunderbolts were riding into town he looked into the Hawk's Nest, and discovered that Tomahawk was not there. Then he made his way rapidly to the widow's.

There he saw what Tomahawk had seen before him, and with whirling brain and flaming eyes, he started a man through the camp in search of the abductors.

He was completely at a loss for a plan of action for a moment; but, chance favored him.

As he ran, almost aimlessly, the figure of an

Indian, skulking through the shadows, caught his eye, and he halted abruptly and drew back from sight.

The Thug was Long Knife, returning to his master after warning the pards at the Hawk's Nest.

"Perhaps he is going to Tomahawk," thought the youth, and he followed noiselessly.

His supposition was correct.

A sudden burst of flame through the rafters of the doomed Red Light revealed the chief of desperadoes waiting impatiently for his red companion beneath the sheltering branches of a tree, mounted, and with his now conscious captive in his arms.

Long Knife was in the act of mounting the second horse, and Tomahawk, with the unmistakable sounds of the battle at his cabin ringing in his ears, was calling eternal vengeance on the heads of his foes, when there was a shot near at hand, and the last of the Thugs fell forward with his face in the dust.

Prince Philip had not lost a moment when the situation was revealed to him, for indeed there was not a moment to lose.

His shot was like an inspiration, for it went true to the mark, and no sooner was it delivered than, with a long leap, he stood in front of the big desperado with one hand on the bridle and the other extending a weapon that glistened in the glare of the burning saloon.

"At last, Tomahawk!" was the boy's cry. "At last vengeance is ready to strike! Drop your precious burden, Tomahawk! There will be no wedding to-night!"

The girl was struggling, and it was all her captor could do to hold her, to say nothing of drawing a weapon to defend himself. Therefore the command was readily obeyed, and Phosa struck the ground on her feet. She leaned against the tree, faint with excitement, and breathing a prayer for Philip and gratitude for her timely deliverance.

"Captain Thunderbolt is here!" cried the youth, "and that is the signal I have been waiting for to pay you what I owe, Tomahawk! I want to avenge the murder of Major Weldon and Phosa's mother—her mother and my father! The two dastardly crimes of Ranch Robin are avenged to-night!"

Tomahawk snatched a weapon from the holsters of the saddle and shoved it forward with the swiftness of light.

There was a thrilling cry and a loud report—but it was not the Dogtown desperado who pressed the trigger.

It was Prince Philip the spy, and his aim was true!

Tomahawk reeled from his saddle, and the angels in heaven must have rejoiced at the sight.

Then Phosa fell forward into Philip's arms.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN the morning sun rose over the mountains, peace reigned in the little gold camp, but the dead bodies over which the vultures were already circling told the story of the terrible night.

Triple Butte rejoiced. For the first time in its history it was free of the thrall of lawlessness, and now it could be, thanks to Prince Philip and the Thunderbolt Rangers, the quiet and orderly camp that the majority of its citizens desired.

Blanco's revelations had passed like wildfire through the place, and the discovery that the Red Thugs who had so long menaced the lives of honest men were annihilated along with their white pards was not the least feature of the general satisfaction.

Of Prince Philip's mission in Arizona, it may be said, by way of further explanation, that at the time of Major Weldon's death he was in college in an Eastern city, where, at the command of a foster-father, his natural guardian when Major Weldon was not heard from, he remained until he became of age. Then, being his own master, he set out in search of his father in far Arizona, and as well his step-mother and little Phosa, whom, oddly enough, he had never seen.

He received his first information from Captain Thunderbolt, and, to further his plans, became a member of the celebrated Rangers and their spy.

How well his mission was accomplished these pages have revealed.

He was now ready to return with his beautiful step-sister to the home whose comforts and pleasures she had been denied so long, and where a fortune had so long awaited her claim.

Philip had made his stay in Triple Butte profitable, and secreted in his cabin was enough

gold to make him comfortable for many years. The attempts to find its secret hiding-place had signally failed, for the youth's ingenuity had placed the treasure beyond the possibilities of discovery.

The old padre, Father Alonzo, would accept nothing for his faithful care of Phosa, but, recovering from his wound at the hands of the treacherous Mexican, he blessed Philip and Phosa and went back to his beloved convent in Chihuahua, sad of heart at losing "his little girl," but happy that she was happy.

And she was happy.

Philip had come into her heart and taken possession, and the knowledge which he soon gave her that he returned her love two-fold repaid her for all her years of sorrow.

The good "widdy" nursed Eagle Jerry back to health, and then it was that she confessed to him that it was not so much to look for her recreant lord that she met the stage on its every arrival as it was to see him, Eagle Jerry; and as about this time there came definite news of the worthless Jake's demise, Eagle Jerry stepped in and became the permanent head of the widow's household. That was even a greater event than his being held up by Captain Eagle's men.

Old Likely sat the long days through in the shadow of the triple buttes, waiting and hoping. One day there was a terrific flood in the mountains, and the little stream that flowed past Old Likely's door was rent with fury. After it was all over what should the old man find at his very door but a quantity of handsome nuggets which had been washed out by the flood! How the tears of joy fell from his eyes as his hands closed over the treasure! And there he sits by the little stream to this day, and to those who speak to him he delights to tell of old times, when Triple Butte was wicked, and Tomahawk threatened him with death if he told what he knew; and how the son of his old friend, Major Weldon, had brought peace and prosperity to the camp by ridding it of Tomahawk and his evil associates.

Captain Thunderbolt and his famous Rangers long ago disbanded, but the good they did is an ever-enduring monument to their memory.

They escorted Philip and Phosa to Tucson, where the two took their departure for the East with affectionate good-byes.

In New York, on one of the most beautiful streets, stands the elegant home of the two whose fortunes have most interested us in this story, and there, not a month ago, I had the pleasure of hearing from their own lips many of the details of the narrative here at an end, and of sharing for a short time the happiness which is so truly and inalienably theirs.

Phosa is more beautiful than ever, and Philip, a hearty and successful man, is very proud, you may be sure, of the wife he so worthily won.

THE END.

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